LIBRARY OF THE
UNIVERSITY OF ILLINOIS
AT URBANA-CHAMPAIGN

823
Sp32u
v.2

David Smith

UNDER LOCK AND KEY.

VOL. II.

Digitized by the Internet Archive
in 2010 with funding from
University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign

http://www.archive.org/details/underlockkeystor02spei

UNDER LOCK AND KEY.

A Story.

BY

T. W. SPEIGHT,

AUTHOR OF "BROUGHT TO LIGHT," "FOOLISH MARGARET," ETC.

IN THREE VOLUMES.

VOL. II.

LONDON:

TINSLEY BROTHERS, 18, CATHERINE STREET, STRAND.

1869.

[*All rights of Translation and Reproduction are reserved.*]

LONDON:
SAVILL EDWARDS AND CO., PRINTERS, CHANDOS STREET,
COVENT GARDEN.

823
Sp32m
v.2

CONTENTS

OF

THE SECOND VOLUME.

CHAP.		PAGE
I.	JANET IN A NEW CHARACTER	1
II.	THE DAWN OF LOVE	13
III.	THE NARRATIVE OF SERGEANT NICHOLAS	23
IV.	COUNSEL TAKEN WITH MR. MADGIN . .	46
V.	MR. MADGIN AT THE HELM	62
VI.	MR. MADGIN'S SECRET JOURNEY . . .	81
VII.	ENTER MADGIN, JUNIOR	92
VIII.	MADGIN JUNIOR'S FIRST REPORT . . .	113
IX.	LOST AS SOON AS FOUND	129
X.	THE CONFESSION	146

CHAP. PAGE

XI. THE CONFESSION CONTINUED 163

XII. MADGIN JUNIOR'S SECOND REPORT . . 182

XIII. ROOM NUMBER FOUR IN THE CORRIDOR . 201

XIV. AT THE CURTAINED DOOR 218

XV. THE LITTLE PACKET FROM LONDON . . 229

XVI. MADGIN JUNIOR'S THIRD REPORT . . 252

UNDER LOCK AND KEY.

CHAPTER I.

JANET IN A NEW CHARACTER.

On entering Lady Pollexfen's room for the second time, Janet found that the mistress of Dupley Walls had completed her toilette in the interim, and was now sitting robed in stiff rustling silk, with an Indian fan in one hand and a curiously-chased vinaigrette in the other. She motioned with her fan to Janet. "Be seated," she said, in the iciest of tones, and Janet sat down on a chair a yard or two removed from her ladyship.

"Since you were here last, Miss Holme," she began, "I have seen Sister Agnes, who informs me that she has already given you an outline of the duties I shall require you to perform should

you agree to accept the situation which ill health obliges her to vacate. At the same time, I wish you clearly to understand that I do not consider you in any way bound by what I may have done for you in time gone by, neither would I have you in this matter run counter to your inclinations in the slightest degree. If you would prefer that a situation as governess should be obtained for you, say so without hesitation, and any small influence I may have shall be used ungrudgingly in your behalf. Should you agree to remain at Dupley Walls your salary will be thirty guineas a year. If you wish it, you can take a day for consideration, and let me have your decision in the morning."

Lady Pollexfen's mention of a fixed salary stung Janet to the quick; it was so entirely unexpected. It stung her, but only for a moment; the next she saw and gratefully recognised the fact that she should no longer be a pensioner on the bounty of Lady Pollexfen. A dependent she might be—a servant even, if you like; but at least she would be earning her living by the labour of her own hands, and even about the

very thought of such a thing there was a sweet sense of independence that flushed her warmly through and through.

Her hesitation lasted but a moment, then she spoke. "Your ladyship is very kind, but I require no time for consideration," she said. "I have already made up my mind to take the position which you have so generously offered me, and if my ability to please you only prove equal to my inclination, your ladyship will not have much cause to complain."

A faint smile of something like satisfaction flitted across Lady Pollexfen's face. "Very good, Miss Holme," she said, in a more gracious tone than she had yet used. "I am pleased to find that you have taken so sensible a view of the matter, and that you understand so thoroughly your position under my roof. How soon shall you be prepared to begin your new duties?"

"I am ready at this moment."

"Come to me an hour hence and I will then instruct you."

In this second interview, brief though it was,

Janet could not avoid being struck by Lady Pollexfen's stately dignity of manner. Her tone and style were those of a high-bred gentlewoman. It seemed scarcely possible that she and the querulous shrivelled-up old woman in the cashmere dressing-robe could be one individual.

Unhappily, as Janet to her cost was not long in finding out, her ladyship's querulous moods were much more frequent than her moods of quiet dignity. At such times she was very difficult to please; sometimes, indeed, it was utterly impossible to please her: not even an angel could have done it. Then, indeed, Janet felt her duty weigh very hardly upon her. By nature her temper was quick and passionate—her impulses high and generous; but when Lady Pollexfen was in her worse moods she had to curb the former as with an iron chain, while the latter were outraged continually by Lady Pollexfen's mean and miserly mode of life, and by a certain low and sordid tone of thought which at such times pervaded all she said and did. And yet, strange to say, she had rare fits of generosity and goodwill—times when her soul seemed to sit

in sackcloth and ashes, as if in repentance for those other occasions when the "dark fit" was on her and the things of this world claimed her too entirely as their own.

After her second interview with Lady Pollexfen, Janet at once hurried off to Sister Agnes to tell her the news. "On one point only, so far as I see at present, shall I require any special information," she said. "I shall require to know exactly the mode of procedure necessary to be observed when I pay my midnight visits to Sir John Pollexfen."

"It is not my intention that you should visit Sir John," said Sister Agnes. "That portion of my old duties will continue to be performed by me."

"Not till you are stronger—not till your health is better than it is now," said Janet earnestly. "I am young and strong; it is merely a part of what I have undertaken to do, and you must please let me do it. I have outgrown my childish fears and could visit the Black Room now without the quiver of a nerve."

"You think so, by daylight, but wait till the

house is dark and silent, and then say the same conscientiously—if you can."

But Janet was determined not to yield the point, nor could Sister Agnes move her from her decision. Ultimately a compromise was entered into by which it was agreed that for one evening at least they should visit the Black Room together, and that the settlement of the question should be left till the following day.

Precisely as midnight struck they set out together up the wide old-fashioned staircase, past the door of Janet's old room, up the narrower staircase beyond, till the streak of light came into view and the grim nail-studded door itself was reached. Janet was secretly glad that she was not there alone, so much she acknowledged to herself as they halted for a moment while Sister Agnes unlocked the door. But when the latter asked her if she were not afraid, if she would not much rather be snug in bed, Janet only said: "Give me the key, tell me what I have to do inside the room, and then leave me."

But Sister Agnes would not consent to that, and they entered the room together. Instead of seven years, it seemed to Janet only seven hours since she had been there last, so vividly was the recollection of her first visit still impressed upon her mind. Everything was unchanged in that chamber of the dead, except, perhaps, the sprawling cupids on the ceiling, which looked a shade dingier than of old, and more in need of soap and water than ever. But the black draperies on the walls, the huge candles in the silver tripods, the pall-covered coffin in the middle of the room, were all as Janet had seen them last. There, too, was the oaken *priedieu* a yard or two away from the head of the coffin. Sister Agnes knelt on it for a few moments, and bent her head in silent prayer.

"My visit to this room every midnight," said Sister Agnes, "is made for the simple purpose of renewing the candles, and of seeing that everything is as it should be. That the visit should be made at midnight, and at no other time, is one of Lady Pollexfen's whims—a whim that by process of time has crystallized

into a law. The room is never entered by day."

"Was it whim or madness that caused Sir John Pollexfen to leave orders that his body should be kept above ground for twenty years?"

"Who shall tell by what motive he was influenced when he had that particular clause inserted in his will? Dupley Walls itself hangs on the proper fulfilment of the clause. If Lady Pollexfen were to cause her husband's remains to be interred in the family vault before the expiry of the twenty years, the very day she did so the estate would pass from her to the present baronet, a distant cousin, between whom and her ladyship there has been a bitter feud of many years' standing. Although Dupley Walls has been in the family for a hundred and fifty years, it has never been entailed. The entailed estate is in Yorkshire, and there Sir Mark, the present baronet, resides. Lady Pollexfen has the power of bequeathing Dupley Walls to whomsoever she may please, providing she carry out strictly the instructions contained in her husband's will. It is possible that in a

court of law the will might have been set aside on the ground of insanity, or the whole matter might have been thrown into Chancery. But Lady Pollexfen did not choose to submit to such an ordeal. All the courts of law in the kingdom could have given her no more than she possessed already—they could merely have given her permission to bury her husband's body, and it did not seem to her that such a permission could compensate for the turning into public gossip of a private chapter of family history. So here Sir John Pollexfen has remained since his death, and here he will stay till the last of the twenty years has become a thing of the past. Two or three times every year Mr. Winter, Sir Mark's lawyer, comes over to Dupley Walls to satisfy himself by ocular proof that Sir John's instructions are being duly carried out. This he has a legal right to do in the interests of his client. Sometimes he is conducted to this room by Lady Pollexfen, sometimes by me; but even in his case her ladyship will not relax her rule of not having the room visited by day."

Sister Agnes then showed Janet that behind the black draperies there was a cupboard in the wall, which on being opened proved to contain a quantity of large candles. One by one Sister Agnes took out of the silver tripod what remained of the candles of the previous day, and filled up their places with fresh ones. Janet looked on attentively. Then, for the second time, Sister Agnes knelt on the *prie-dieu* for a few moments, and then she and Janet left the room.

Next day Sister Agnes was so ill, and Janet pressed so earnestly to be allowed to attend to the Black Room in place of her, and alone, that she was obliged to give a reluctant consent.

It was not without an inward tremor that Janet heard the clock strike twelve. Sister Agnes had insisted on accompanying her part of the way upstairs, and would, in fact, have gone the whole distance with her, had not Janet insisted on going forward alone. In a single breath, as it seemed to her, she ran up the remaining stairs, unlocked the door, and entered the room. Her nerves were not sufficiently

composed to allow of her making use of the *prie-dieu*. All she cared for just then was to get through her duty as quickly as possible, and get back in safety to the world of living beings downstairs. She set her teeth, and by a supreme effort of will went through the small duty that was required of her steadily but swiftly. Her face was never turned away from the coffin the whole time; and when she had finished her task she walked backwards to the door, opened it, walked backwards out, and in another breath was downstairs, and safe in the protecting arms of Sister Agnes.

Next night she insisted upon going entirely alone, and made so light of the matter that Sister Agnes no longer opposed her wish to make the midnight visit to the Black Room a part of her ordinary duty. But inwardly Janet could never quite overcome her secret awe of the room and its silent occupant. She always dreaded the coming of the hour that took her there, and when her task was over, she never closed the door without a feeling of relief. In this case, custom with her never bred familiarity.

To the last occasion of her going there she went the prey of hidden fears—fears of she knew not what, which she derided to herself even while they made her their victim. There was a morbid thread running through the tissue of her nerves, which by intense force of will might be kept from growing and spreading, but which no effort of hers could quite pluck out or eradicate.

CHAPTER II.

THE DAWN OF LOVE.

Major Strickland did not forget his promise to Janet. On the eighth morning after his return from London he walked over from Tydsbury to Dupley Walls, saw Lady Pollexfen, and obtained leave of absence for Miss Holme for the day. Then he paid a flying visit to Sister Agnes, for whom he had a great reverence and admiration, and ended by carrying off Janet in triumph.

The park of Dupley Walls extends almost to the suburbs of Tydsbury, a town of eight thousand inhabitants, but of such small commercial importance that the nearest railway station is three miles away across country, and nearly five miles from Dupley Walls.

Major Strickland no longer resided at Rose Cottage, but at a pretty little villa just outside

Tydsbury. Some small accession of fortune had come to him by the death of a relative; and an addition to his family in the person of Aunt Felicité, a lady old and nearly blind, the widow of a kinsman of the major. Besides its tiny lawn and flower-beds in front, the Lindens had a long stretch of garden ground behind, otherwise the major would scarcely have been happy in his new home. He was secretary to the Tydsbury Horticultural Society, and his fame as a grower of prize roses and prize geraniums was in these latter days far sweeter to him than any fame that had ever accrued to him as a soldier.

Janet found Aunt Felicité a most quaint and charming old lady, as cheerful and full of vivacity as many a girl of seventeen. She kissed Janet on both cheeks when the major introduced her; asked whether she was *fiancée;* complimented her on her French; declaimed a passage from Racine; put her poodle through a variety of amusing tricks; and pressed Janet to assist at her luncheon of cream cheese, French roll, strawberries, and white wine.

A slight sense of disappointment swept across

Janet's mind, like the shadow of a cloud across a sunny field. She had been two hours at the Lindens without having seen Captain George. In vain she told herself that she had come to spend the day with Major Strickland, and to be introduced to Aunt Felicité, and that nothing more was wanting to her complete contentment. That something more was needed she knew quite well, but she would not acknowledge it even to herself. He knew of her coming, he had been with Aunt Felicité only half an hour before—so much she learned within five minutes of her arrival; yet now, at the end of two hours, he had not condescended even to come and speak to her. She roused herself from the sense of despondency that was creeping over her, and put on a gaiety that she was far from feeling. A very bitter sense of self-contempt was just then at work in her heart: she felt that never before had she despised herself so utterly. She took her hat in her hand, and put her arm within the major's, and walked with him round his little demesne. It was a walk that took up an hour or more, for there was much to see and learn,

and Janet was bent this morning on having a long lesson in botany, and the old soldier was only too happy to have secured a listener so enthusiastic and appreciative to whom he could dilate on his favourite hobby.

But all this time Janet's eyes and ears were on the alert in a double sense of which the major knew nothing. He was busy with a description of the last spring flower-show, and how the Duke of Cheltenham's auriculas were by no means equal to those of Major Strickland, when Janet gave a little start as though a gnat had stung her, and bent to smell a sweet blush-rose, whose tints were rivalled by the sudden delicate glow that flushed her cheek.

"Yes, yes!" she said, hurriedly, as the major paused for a moment; "and so the duke's gardener was jealous because you carried away the prize?"

"I never saw a man more put out in my life," said the major. "He shook his fist at my flowers, and said before everybody, 'Let the old major only wait till autumn, and then see if my dahlias don't——.' But yonder comes Geordie.

Bless my heart! what has he been doing at Tydsbury all this time?"

Janet's instinct had not deceived her: she had heard and recognised his footstep a full minute before the major knew that he was near. She gave one quick, shy glance round as he opened the gate, and then she wandered a yard or two further down the path.

"Good morning, uncle," said Captain George, as he came up. "You set out for Dupley Walls so early this morning that I did not see you before you started. I am glad to find that you did not come back alone."

Janet had turned as he began to speak, but did not come back to the major's side. Captain George advanced a few steps and lifted his hat. "Good morning, Miss Holme," he said, with outstretched hand. "I need hardly say how pleased I am to see you at the Lindens. My uncle has succeeded so well on his first embassy that we must send him again and often on the same errand."

Janet murmured a few words in reply—what, she could not afterward have told; but as her

eyes met his for a moment, she read in them something that made her forgive him on the spot, even while she declared to herself that she had nothing to forgive, and that brought to her cheek a second blush more vivid than the first.

"All very well, young gentleman," said the major, "but you have not yet explained your four hours' absence. We shall order you under arrest unless you have some reasonable excuse to submit."

"The best of all excuses—that of urgent business," said the captain.

"You! business!" said the laughing major; "why, it was only last night that you were bewailing your lot as being one of those unhappy mortals who have no work to do."

"To those they love, the gods lend patient hearing. I forget the Latin, but that does not matter just now. What I wish to convey is this —that I need no longer be idle unless I choose. I have got some work to do. Lend me your ears, both of you. About an hour after you, sir, had started for Dupley Walls I received

a note from the editor of the *Tydsbury Courier*, in which he requested me to give him an early call. My curiosity prompted me to look in upon him as soon as breakfast was over. I found that he was brother to the editor of one of the London magazines, a gentleman whom I met one evening at a party in town. The London editor remembered me, and had written to the Tydsbury editor to make arrangements with me for writing a series of magazine articles on India and my experiences there during the late mutiny. I need not bore you with details; it is sufficient to say that my objections were talked down one by one, and I left the office committed to a sixteen-page article by the sixth of next month."

"You an author!" exclaimed the major. "I should as soon have thought of your enlisting in the marines."

"It will only be for a few months, uncle,—only till my limited stock of experiences shall be exhausted. After that I shall be relegated to my natural obscurity, doubtless never to emerge again."

"Hem," said the major, nervously. "Geordie, my boy, I have by me one or two little poems which I wrote when I was about nineteen—trifles flung off on the inspiration of the moment. Perhaps, when you come to know your friend the editor better than you do now, you might induce him to bring them out—to find an odd corner for them in his magazine. I wouldn't want paying for them, you know. You might just mention that fact; and I assure you that I have seen many worse things than they are in print."

"What, uncle, you an author! Oh, fie! I should as soon have thought of your wishing to dance on the tight-rope as to appear in print. But we must look over these little effusions, eh, Miss Holme? We must unearth this genius, and be the first to give his lucubrations to the world."

"If you were younger, sir, or I not quite so old, I would box your ears," said the major, who seemed hardly to know whether to laugh or be angry. Finally he laughed, George and Janet chimed in, and all three went back indoors.

After an early dinner the major took rod and line and set off to capture a few trout for supper. Aunt Felicité took her post-prandial nap discreetly, in an easy-chair, and Captain George and Miss Holme were left to their own devices. In Love's sweet Castle of Indolence the hours that make up a summer afternoon pass like so many minutes. They two had blown the magic horn and had gone in. The gates of brass had closed behind them, shutting them up from the common outer world. Over all things was a glamour as of witchcraft. Soft music filled the air; soft breezes came to them as from fields of amaranth and asphodel. They walked ever in a magic circle, that widened before them as they went. Eros in passing had touched them with his golden dart. Each of them hid the sweet sting from the other, yet neither of them would have been whole again for anything the world could have offered. What need to tell the old old story over again—the story of the dawn of love in two young hearts that had never loved before?

Janet went home that night in a flutter of

happiness—a happiness so sweet and strange and yet so vague that she could not have analysed it even had she been casuist enough to try to do so. But she was content to accept the fact as a fact; beyond that she cared nothing. No syllable of love had been spoken between her and George: they had passed what to an outsider would have seemed a very commonplace afternoon. They had talked together—not sentiment, but every-day topics of the world around them; they had read together—poetry, but nothing more passionate than "Aurora Leigh;" they had walked together—rather a silent and stupid walk, our friendly outsider would have urged; but if they were content, no one else had any right to complain. And so the day had worn itself away,—a red-letter day for ever in the calendar of their young lives.

CHAPTER III.

THE NARRATIVE OF SERGEANT NICHOLAS.

One morning when Janet had been about three weeks at Dupley Walls, she was summoned to the door by one of the servants, and found there a tall, thin, middle-aged man, dressed in plain clothes, and having all the appearance of a discharged soldier.

"I have come a long way, miss," he said to Janet, carrying a finger to his forehead, "in order to see Lady Pollexfen and have a little private talk with her."

"I am afraid that her ladyship will scarcely see you, unless you can give her some idea of the business that you have called upon."

"My name, miss, is Sergeant John Nicholas. I served formerly in India, where I was body-servant to her ladyship's son, Captain Charles

Pollexfen, who died there of cholera nearly twenty years ago, and I have something of importance to communicate."

Janet made the old soldier come in and sit down in the hall while she took his message to Lady Pollexfen. Her ladyship was not yet up, but was taking her chocolate in bed, with a faded Indian shawl thrown round her shoulders. She began to tremble violently the moment Janet delivered the old soldier's message, and could scarcely set down her cup and saucer. Then she began to cry, and to kiss the hem of the Indian shawl. Janet went softly out of the room and waited. She had never even heard of this Captain Charles Pollexfen, and yet no mere empty name could have thus affected the stern mistress of Dupley Walls. Those few tears opened up quite a new view of Lady Pollexfen's character. Janet began to see that there might be elements of tragedy in the old woman's life of which she knew nothing: that many of the moods which seemed to her so strange and inexplicable might be so merely for want of the key by which alone they could be rightly read.

Presently her ladyship's gong sounded. Janet went back into the room, and found her still sitting up in bed, sipping her chocolate with a steady hand. All traces of tears had vanished: she looked even more stern and repressed than usual.

"Request the person of whom you spoke to me a while ago to wait," she said. "I will see him at eleven in my private sitting-room."

So Sergeant Nicholas was sent to get his breakfast in the servants' room, and wait till Lady Pollexfen was ready to receive him.

At eleven precisely he was summoned to her ladyship's presence. She received him with stately graciousness, and waved him to a chair a yard or two away. She was dressed for the day in one of her stiff brocaded silks, and sat as upright as a dart, manipulating a small fan. Miss Holme stood close at the back of her chair.

"So, my good man, I understand that you were acquainted with my son, the late Captain Pollexfen, who died in India twenty years ago?"

"I was his body-servant for two years previous to his death."

"Were you with him when he died?"

"I was, your ladyship. These fingers closed his eyes."

The hand that held the fan began to tremble again. She remained silent for a few moments, and by a strong effort overmastered her agitation.

"You have some communication which you wish to make to me respecting my dead son?"

"I have, your ladyship. A communication of a very singular kind."

"Why has it not been made before now?"

"That your ladyship will learn in the course of what I have to say. But perhaps you will kindly allow me to tell my story my own way."

"By all means. Pray begin: I am all attention."

The sergeant touched his forelock, gave a preliminary cough, fixed his clear grey eye on Lady Pollexfen, and began his narrative as under:—

"Your ladyship and miss; I, John Nicholas, a Staffordshire man born and bred, went out to India twenty-three years ago as lance-corporal

in the hundred and first regiment of foot. After I had been in India a few months, I got drunk and misbehaved myself, and was reduced to the ranks. Well, ma'am, Captain Pollexfen took a fancy to me, thought I was not such a bad dog after all, and got me appointed as his servant. And a better master no man need ever wish to have—kind, generous, and a perfect gentleman from top to toe. I loved him, and would have gone through fire and water to serve him."

Her ladyship's fan was trembling again. "Oblige me with my salts, Miss Holme," she said. She pressed them to her nose, and motioned to the sergeant to proceed.

"When I had been with the captain a few months," resumed the old soldier, "he got leave of absence for several weeks, and everybody knew that it was his intention to spend his holiday in a shooting excursion among the hills. I was to go with him, of course, and the usual troop of native servants; but besides himself there was only one European gentleman in the party, and he was not an Englishman. He was

a Russian, and his name was Platzoff. He was a gentleman of fortune, and was travelling in India at the time, and had come to my master with letters of introduction. Well, Captain Pollexfen just took wonderfully to him, and the two were almost inseparable. Perhaps it hardly becomes one like me to offer an opinion on such a point; but, knowing what afterwards happened, I must say that I never either liked or trusted that Russian from the day I first set eyes on him. He seemed to me too double-faced and cunning for an honest English gentleman to have much to do with. But he had travelled a great deal, and was very good company, which was perhaps the reason why Captain Pollexfen took so kindly to him. Be that as it may, however, it was decided that they should go on the hunting excursion together—not that the Russian was much of a shot, or cared a great deal about hunting, but because, as I heard him say, he liked to see all kinds of life, and tiger-stalking was something quite fresh to him.

"He was a curious-looking gentleman, too, that Russian—just the sort of face that you

would never forget after once seeing it, with skin that was dried and yellow like parchment; black hair that was trained into a heavy curl on the top of his forehead, and a big hooked nose.

"Well, your ladyship and miss, away we went with our elephants and train of servants, and very pleasantly we spent our two months' leave of absence. The captain he shot tigers, and the Russian he did his best at pig-sticking. Our last week had come, and in three more days we were to set off on our return, when that terrible misfortune happened which deprived me of the best of masters, and your ladyship of the best of sons.

"Early one morning I was roused by Rung Budruck, the captive's favourite sycee or groom. 'Get up at once,' he said, shaking me by the shoulder. 'The sahib captain is very ill. The black devil has seized him. He must have opium or he will die.' I ran at once to the captain's tent, and as soon as I set eyes on him I saw that he had been seized with cholera. I went off at once and fetched M. Platzoff. We had nothing in the way of medicine with us except

brandy and opium. Under the Russian's directions these were given to my poor master in large quantities, but he grew gradually worse. Rung and I in everything obeyed M. Platzoff, who seemed to know quite well what ought to be done in such cases; and to tell the truth, your ladyship, he seemed as much put about as if the captain had been his own brother. Well, the captain grew weaker as the day went on, and towards evening it grew quite clear that he could not last much longer. The pain had left him by this time, but he was so frightfully reduced that we could not bring him round. He was lying in every respect like one already dead, except for his faint breathing, when the Russian left the tent for a moment, and I took his place at the head of the bed. Rung was standing with folded arms a yard or two away. None of the other native servants could be persuaded to enter the tent, so frightened were they of catching the complaint. Suddenly my poor master opened his eyes, and his lips moved. I put my ear to his mouth. 'The diamond,' he whispered. 'Take it—mother—give my love.' Not a word more

on earth, your ladyship. His limbs stiffened; his head fell back; he gave a great sigh and died. I gently closed the eyes that could see no more, and left the tent crying.

"Your ladyship, we buried Captain Pollexfen by torchlight four hours later. We dug his grave deep in a corner of the jungle, and there we left him to his last sleep. Over his grave we piled a heap of stones, as I have read that they used to do in the old times over the grave of a chief. It was all we could do.

"About an hour later M. Platzoff came to me. 'I shall start before daybreak for Chinapore,' he said, 'with one elephant and a couple of men. I will take with me the news of my poor friend's untimely fate, and you can come on with the luggage and other effects in the ordinary way. You will find me at Chinapore when you reach there.' Next morning I found that he was gone.

"What my dear master had said with his last breath about a diamond puzzled me. I could only conclude that amongst his effects there must be some valuable stone of which he

wished special care to be taken, and which he desired to be sent home to you, madam, in England. I knew nothing of any such stone, and I considered it beyond my position to search for it among his luggage. I decided that when I got to Chinapore I would give his message to the Colonel, and leave that gentleman to take such steps in the matter as he might think best.

"I had hardly settled all this in my mind when Rung Budruck came to me. 'The Russian sahib has gone: I have something to tell you,' he said, only he spoke in broken English. 'Yesterday, just after the sahib captain was dead, the Russian came back. You had left the tent, and I was sitting on the ground behind the captain's big trunk, the lid of which was open. I was sitting with my chin in my hand, very sad at heart, when the Russian came in. He looked carefully round the tent. Me he could not see, but I could see him through the opening between the hinges of the box. What did he do? He unfastened the bosom of the sahib captain's shirt, and then he drew over the captain's head the steel chain with the little gold

box hanging to it that he always wore. He opened the box, and saw there was that in it which he expected to find there. Then he hid away both chain and box in one of his pockets, rebuttoned the dead man's shirt, and left the tent.' 'But you have not told me what there was in the box,' I said. He put the tips of his fingers together and smiled: 'In that box was the Great Mogul Diamond!'

"Your ladyship, I was so startled when Rung said this that the wind of a bullet would have knocked me down. A new light was all at once thrown on the captain's dying words. 'But how do you know, Rung, that the box contained a diamond?' I asked when I had partly got over my surprise. He smiled again, with that strange slow smile which those fellows have. 'It matters not how, but Rung knew that the diamond was there. He had seen the captain open the box, and take it out and look at it many a time when the captain thought no one could see him. He could have stolen it from him almost any night when he was asleep, but that was left for his friend to do.' 'Was the

diamond you speak of a very valuable one?' I asked. 'It was a green diamond of immense value,' answered Rung; 'it was called *The Great Mogul* because it was first worn by the terrible Aureng-Zebe himself, who had it set in the haft of his scimetar.' 'But by what means did Captain Pollexfen become possessed of so valuable a stone?' Said he, 'Two years ago, at the risk of his own life, he rescued the eldest son of the Rajah of Gondulpootra from a tiger who had carried away the child into the jungle. The rajah is one of the richest men in India, and he showed his gratitude by secretly presenting the Great Mogul Diamond to the man who had saved the life of his child.' 'But why should Captain Pollexfen carry so valuable a stone about his person?' I asked. 'Would it not have been wiser to deposit it in the bank at Bombay till such time as the captain could take it with him to England?' Said Rung, 'The stone is a charmed stone, and it was the rajah's particular wish that the Sahib Pollexfen should always wear it about his person. So long as he did so he could not come to his death by fire, by water, or

by sword thrust.' Said I, 'But how did the Russian know that Captain Pollexfen carried the diamond about his person?' Said Rung, 'One night when the captain had had too much wine he showed the diamond to his friend.' Said I, 'But how does it happen, Rung, that you know this?' Said Rung, smiling and putting his finger tips together, 'How does it happen that I know so much about you?' And then he told me a lot of things about myself that I thought no soul in India knew. It was just wonderful how he did it. 'So it is: let that be sufficient,' he finished by saying. Said I, 'Why did you not tell me till after the Russian had gone away that you saw him steal the diamond? If you had told me at the time I could have charged him with it.' Said Rung, 'You are ignorant; you are little more than a child. The Russian sahib had the evil eye. Had I crossed his purposes before his face he would have cursed me while he looked at me, and I should have withered away and died. He has got the diamond, and only by magic can it ever be recovered from him.'

"Your ladyship and miss,—I hope I am not tedious nor wandering from the point. It will be sufficient to say that when I got down to Chinapore I found that M. Platzoff had indeed been there, but only just long enough to see the colonel and give him an account of Captain Pollexfen's death, after which he had at once engaged a palanquin and bearers and set out with all speed for Bombay. It was now my turn to see the colonel, and after I had given over into his hands all my dead master's property that I had brought with me from the Hills, I told him the story of the diamond as Rung had told it to me. He was much struck by it, and ordered me to take Rung to him the next morning. But that very night Rung disappeared, and was never seen in the camp again. Whether he was frightened at what he called the Russian's evil eye—frightened that Platzoff could blight him even from a distance, I have no means of knowing. In any case, gone he was; and from that day to this I have never set eyes on him. Well, the colonel said he would take a note of what I had told him about the diamond,

and that I must leave the matter entirely in his hands.

"Your ladyship, a fortnight after that the colonel shot himself.

"To make short a long story—we got a fresh colonel, and were removed to another part of the country; and there, a few weeks later, I was knocked down by fever, and was a long time before I thoroughly recovered my strength. A year or two later our regiment was ordered back to England, but a day or two before we should have sailed I had a letter telling me that my old sweetheart was dead. This news seemed to take all care for life out of me, and on the spur of the moment I volunteered into a regiment bound for China, in which country war was just breaking out. There, and at other places abroad, I stopped till just four months ago, when I was finally discharged, with my pension, and a bullet in my pocket that had been taken out of my skull. I only landed in England nine days ago, and as soon as it was possible for me to do so, I came to see your ladyship. And I think that is all." The sergeant's forefinger went to his

forehead again as he brought his narrative to an end.

Lady Pollexfen kept on fanning herself in silence for a little while after the old soldier had done speaking. Her features wore the proud, impassive look that they generally put on when before strangers: in the present case they were no index to the feelings at work underneath. At length she spoke.

"After the suicide of your colonel did you mention the supposed robbery of the diamond to any one else?"

"To no one else, your ladyship. For several reasons. I was unaware what steps he might have taken between the time of my telling him and the time of his death to prove or disprove the truth of the story. In the second place, Rung had disappeared. I could only tell the story at secondhand. It had been told me by an eyewitness, but that witness was a native, and the word of a native does not go for much in those parts. In the third place, the Russian had also disappeared, and had left no trace behind. What could I do? Had I told the story to my

new colonel, I should mayhap only have been scouted as a liar or a madman. Besides, we were every day expecting to be ordered home, and I had made up my mind that I would at once come and see your ladyship. At that time I had no intention of going to China, and when once I got there it was too late to speak out. But through all the years I have been away my poor dear master's last words have lived in my memory. Many a thousand times have I thought of them both day and night, and prayed that I might live to get back to Old England, if it was only to give your ladyship the message with which I had been charged."

"But why could you not write to me?" asked Lady Pollexfen.

"Your ladyship, I am no scholar," answered the old soldier, with a vivid blush. "What I have told you to-day in half an hour would have taken me years to set down—in fact, I could never have done it."

"So be it," said Lady Pollexfen. "My obligation to you is all the greater for bearing in mind for so many years my poor boy's last message, and

for being at so much trouble to deliver it." She sighed deeply and rose from her chair. The sergeant rose too, thinking that his interview was at an end, but at her ladyship's request he reseated himself.

Rejecting Janet's proffered arm, which she was in the habit of leaning on in her perambulations about the house and grounds, Lady Pollexfen walked slowly and painfully out of the room. Presently she returned, carrying an open letter in her hand. Both the ink and the paper on which it was written were faded and yellow with age.

"This is the last letter I ever received from my son," said her ladyship. "I have preserved it religiously, and it bears out very singularly what you, sergeant, have just told me respecting the message which my darling sent me with his dying breath. In a few lines at the end he makes mention of a something of great value which he is going to bring home with him; but he writes about it in such guarded terms that I never could satisfy myself as to the precise meaning of what he intended to convey. You, Miss Holme,

will perhaps be good enough to read the lines in question aloud. They are contained in a postscript."

Janet took the letter with reverent tenderness. Lady Pollexfen's trembling finger pointed out the lines she was to read. Janet read as under:—

"P.S.—I have reserved my most important bit of news till the last, as lady correspondents are said to do. Observe, I write 'are said to do,' because in this matter I have very little personal experience of my own to go upon. You, dear mum, are my solitary lady correspondent, and postscripts are a luxury in which you rarely indulge. But to proceed, as the novelists say. Some two years ago it was my good fortune to rescue a little yellow-skinned princekin from the clutches of a very fine young tiger (my feet are on his hide at this present writing), who was carrying him off as a tit-bit for his supper. He was terribly mauled, you may be sure, but his people followed my advice in their mode of doctoring him, and he gradually got round

again. The lad's father is a rajah, immensely rich, and a direct descendent of that ancient Mogul dynasty which once ruled this country with a rod of iron. The rajah has daughters innumerable, but only this one son. His gratitude for what I had done was unbounded. A few weeks ago he gave me a most astounding proof of it. By a secret and trusty messenger he sent me——. But no, dear mum, I will not tell you what the rajah sent me. This letter might chance to fall into other hands than yours (Indian letters do *sometimes* miscarry), and the secret is one which had better be kept in the family—at least for the present. So, mother mine, your curiosity must rest unsatisfied for a little while to come. I hope to be with you before many months are over, and then you shall know everything.

"The value of the rajah's present is something immense. I shall sell it when I get to England, and out of the proceeds I shall——well, I don't exactly know what I shall do. Purchase my next step for one thing, but that will cost a mere trifle. Then, perhaps, buy a comfortable

estate in the country, or a house in Park-lane. Your six weeks every season in London lodgings was always inexplicable to me.

"Or shall I not sell the rajah's present, but offer myself in marriage to some fair princess, with my heart in one hand and the G.M.D. in the other? Madder things than that are recorded in history. In any case, don't forget to pray for the safe arrival of your son, and (if such a petition is allowable) that he may not fail to bring with him the G.M.D.

"C. P."

"I never could understand before to-day what the letters G.M.D. were meant for," said Lady Pollexfen, as Janet gave her back the letter. "It is now quite evident that they were intended for *Great Mogul Diamond;* all of which, as I said before, is confirmatory of the story you have just told me. Of course, after the lapse of so many years, there is not the remotest possibility of recovering the diamond; but my obligation to you, Sergeant Nicholas, is in no wise lessened by that fact. What are your engagements?

Are you obliged to leave here immediately, or can you remain a short time in the neighbourhood?"

"I can give your ladyship a week, or even a fortnight, if you wish it."

"I am greatly obliged to you. I do wish it—I wish to talk to you respecting my son, and you are the only one now living who can tell me about him. You shall find that I am not ungrateful for what you have done for me. In the meantime, you will stop at the King's Arms, in Tydsbury. Miss Holme will give you a note to the landlord. Come up here to-morrow at eleven. And now I must say good morning. I am not very strong, and your news has shaken me a little. Will you do me the honour of shaking hands with me? It was your hands that closed my poor boy's eyes—that touched him last on earth; let those hands now be touched by his mother."

Lady Pollexfen stood up and extended both her withered hands. The old soldier came forward with a blush and took them respectfully, tenderly. He bent his head and touched each

of them in turn with his lips. Tears stood in his eyes.

"God bless you, Sergeant Nicholas! You are a good man, and a true gentleman," said Lady Pollexfen. Then she turned and slowly left the room.

CHAPTER IV.

COUNSEL TAKEN WITH MR. MADGIN.

After her interview with Sergeant Nicholas, Lady Pollexfen dismissed Janet for the day, and retired to her own rooms, nor was she seen out of them till the following morning. No one was admitted to see her save Dance. Janet, after sitting with Sister Agnes all the afternoon, went down at dusk to the housekeeper's room.

"Whatever did you do to her ladyship this morning?" asked Dance as soon as she entered. "She has tasted neither bit nor sup since breakfast, but ever since that old shabby-looking fellow went away she has lain on the sofa, staring at the wall as if there was some writing on it she was trying to read but didn't know how. I thought she was ill, and asked her if I should send for the doctor. She laughed at me without taking her eyes off the wall, and

bade me begone for an old fool. If there's not a change by morning, I shall just send for the doctor without asking her leave. Surely you and that old fellow have bewitched her ladyship between you."

Janet in reply told Dance all that had passed at the morning's interview, feeling quite sure that in doing so she was violating no confidence, and that Lady Pollexfen herself would be the first to tell everything to her faithful old servant as soon as she should be sufficiently composed to do so. As a matter of course Dance was full of wonder.

"Did you know Captain Pollexfen?" asked Janet, as soon as the old dame's surprise had in some measure toned itself down.

"Did I know curly-pated, black-eyed Master Charley?" asked the old woman. "Ay—who better? These arms, withered and yellow now, then plump and strong, held him before he had been an hour in the world. The day he left England I went with her ladyship to see him aboard ship. As he shook me by the hand for the last time he said, 'You will never leave my mother,

will you, Dance?' And I said, 'Never, while I live, dear Master Charles,' and I've kept my word."

"Her ladyship has never been like the same woman since she heard the news of his death," resumed Dance after a pause. "It seemed to sour her and harden her, and make her altogether different. There had been a great deal of unhappiness at home for some years before he went away. He and his father, Sir John—he that now lies so quiet upstairs—had a terrible quarrel just after Master Charles went into the army, and it was a quarrel that was never made up in this world. He was an awful man—Sir John—a wicked man: pray that such a one may never cross your path. The only happiness he seemed to have on earth was in making those over whom he had any power, miserable. It was impossible for my lady to love him, but she tried to do her duty by him till he and Master Charles fell out. What the quarrel was about I never rightly understood, but my lady would have it that Master Charles was in the right and her husband in the wrong. One result was that

Sir John stopped the income that he had always allowed his son, and took a frightful oath that if Master Charles were dying of starvation before his eyes, he would not give him as much as a penny to buy bread with. But her ladyship, who had money in her own right, said that Master Charles's income should go on as usual. Then she and Sir John quarrelled; and she left him and came to live at Dupley Walls, leaving him at Dene Folly; and here she stayed till Sir John was taken with his last illness and sent for her. He sent for her, not to make up the quarrel, but to jibe and sneer at her, and to make her wait on him day and night, as if she were a paid nurse from a hospital. While this was going on, and after Sir John had been quite given up by the doctors, news came from India of Master Charles's death. Well, her ladyship went nigh distracted; but as for the baronet, it was said, though I wont vouch for the truth of it, that he only laughed when the news was told him, and said that if he was plagued as much with corns in the next world as he had been in this, he should find Master Charles's arm very useful

to lean upon. Two days later he died, and the title, and Dene Folly with it, went to a far-away cousin, whom neither Sir John nor his wife had ever seen. Then it was found how the baronet had contrived that his spite should outlive him—for only out of spite and mean cruelty could he have made such a will as he did make: that Dupley Walls should not become her ladyship's absolute property till the end of twenty years, during the whole of which time his body was to remain unburied, and to be kept under the same roof with his widow, wherever she might live. The mean, paltry scoundrel! Perhaps her ladyship might have had the will set aside, but she would not go to law about it. Thank Heaven! the twenty years are nearly at an end. Dupley Walls has been a haunted house ever since that midnight when Sir John was borne in on the shoulders of six strong men. And now tell me whether her ladyship is not a woman to be pitied."

At a quarter before eleven next morning Mr. Solomon Madgin, Lady Pollexfen's agent and

general man-of-business, arrived by appointment at Dupley Walls. Mr. Madgin was indispensable to her ladyship, who had a considerable quantity of house property in and around Tydsbury, consisting chiefly of small tenements, the rents of which had to be collected weekly. Then Mr. Madgin was bailiff for the Dupley Walls estate, in connexion with which were several small farms or "holdings" which required to be well looked after in many ways. Besides all this, her ladyship, having a few spare thousands, had taken of late years to dabbling in scrip and shares in a small way, and under the skilful pilotage of Mr. Madgin had hitherto contrived to steer clear of those rocks and shoals of speculation on which so many gallant argosies are wrecked. In short, everything except the law-business of the estate filtered through Mr. Madgin's hands, and as he did his work cheaply and well, and put up with her ladyship's ill temper without a murmur, the mistress of Dupley Walls could hardly have found any one who would have suited her better.

Mr. Solomon Madgin was a little dried-up man, about sixty years old. His tail-coat and vest of

LIBRARY
UNIVERSITY OF ILLINOIS

rusty black were of the fashion of twenty years ago. He wore drab trowsers, and shoes tied with bows of black ribbon. His head, bald on the crown, had an ample fringe of white hair at the back and sides, and was covered, when he went abroad, with a beaver hat, very fluffy and much too tall for him, and which, once upon a time, had probably been nearly as white as his hair, but was now time-worn and weather-stained to one uniform and consistent drab. Round his neck he always wore a voluminous cravat of unstarched muslin fastened in front with an old-fashioned pearl brooch, above which protruded the two spiked points of a very stiff and pugnacious-looking collar. A strong alpaca umbrella, unfashionably corpulent, was his constant companion. Mr. Madgin's whiskers were shaved off in an exact line with the end of his nose. His eyebrows were very white and bushy, and could serve on occasion as a screen to the greenish crafty-looking eyes below them, which never liked to be peered into too closely. The ordinary expression of his thin dried-up face was one of hard worldly shrewdness; but there was a

lurking *bonhommie* in his smile which seemed to imply that, away from business, he might possibly mellow into a boon companion.

Mr. Madgin had to wait a few minutes this morning before Lady Pollexfen could receive him. When he was ushered into her sitting-room he was surprised to find that she and Miss Holme were not alone; that a plainly-dressed man, who looked almost as old as Mr. Madgin himself, was seated at the table. After one suspicious glance at the stranger, Mr. Madgin made his bow to the ladies and walked up to the table with his bag of papers.

"You can put all those things away for the day, Mr. Madgin," said her ladyship. "A far more important matter claims our attention just now. In the first place, I must introduce to you Sergeant Nicholas, many years ago servant to my son, Captain Pollexfen, who died in India. (Sergeant, this is Mr. Madgin, my man of business.) The sergeant, who has only just returned to England, told me yesterday a very curious story which I am desirous that he should repeat in your presence to-day. The story re-

lates to a diamond of great value, said to have been stolen from the body of my son immediately after death, and I shall require you to give me your opinion as to the feasibility of its recovery. You will take such notes of the narrative as you may think necessary, and the sergeant will afterwards answer, to the best of his ability, any questions you may choose to put to him." Then turning to the old soldier, she added: "You will be good enough, sergeant, to repeat to Mr. Madgin such parts of your narrative of yesterday as have any reference to the diamond. Begin with my son's dying message. Repeat word for word, as closely as you can remember, all that was told you by the sycee Rung. Describe as minutely as possible the personal appearance of M. Platzoff; and detail any other points that bear on the loss of the diamond."

So the sergeant began, but the repetition of a long narrative not learnt by heart is by no means an easy matter, especially when they to whom it was first told hear it for the second time, but rather as critics than as ordinary listeners. Besides, the taking of notes was a

process that smacked of a court-martial and tended to flurry the narrator, making him feel as if he were upon his oath and liable to be browbeat by the counsel for the other side. He was heartily glad when he got to the end of what he had to tell. The postscript to Captain Pollexfen's letter was then read by Miss Holme.

Mr. Madgin took copious notes as the sergeant went on, and afterwards put a few questions to him on different points which he thought not sufficiently clear. Then he laid down his pen, rubbed his hands, and ran his fingers through his scanty hair. Lady Pollexfen rang for her butler, and gave the sergeant into his keeping, knowing that he could not be in better hands. Then she said:—"I will leave you, Mr. Madgin, for half an hour. Go carefully through your notes, and let me have your opinion when I come back as to whether, after so long a time, you think it worth while to institute any proceedings for the recovery of the diamond."

So Mr. Madgin was left alone with what he called his "considering cap." As soon as the door was closed behind her ladyship, he tilted

back his chair, stuck his feet on the table, buried his hands deep in his pockets, and shut his eyes, and so remained for full five-and-twenty minutes. He was busy consulting his notes when Lady Pollexfen re-entered the room. Mr. Madgin began at once.

"I must confess," he said, "that the case which your ladyship has submitted to me seems, from what I can see of it at present, to be surrounded with difficulties. Still, I am far from counselling your ladyship to despair entirely. The few points which, at the first glance, present themselves as requiring for solution are these:— Who was the M. Platzoff who is said to have stolen the diamond? and what position in life did he really occupy? Is he alive or dead? If alive, where is he now living? If he did really steal the diamond, are not the chances as a hundred to one that he disposed of it long ago? But even granting that we were in a position to answer all these questions; suppose even that this M. Platzoff were living in Tydsbury at the present moment, and that fact were known to us, how much nearer should we be to the recovery of the

diamond than we are now? Your ladyship must please to bear in mind that as the case is now we have not an inch of legal ground to stand upon. We have no evidence that would be worth a rush in a court of law that M. Platzoff really purloined the diamond. We have no trustworthy evidence that the diamond itself ever had an existence."

"Surely, Mr. Madgin, my son's letter is sufficient to prove that fact."

"Sufficient, perhaps, in conjunction with the other evidence, to prove it in a moral sense, but certainly not in a legal one," said Mr. Madgin, quietly, but decisively. "Your ladyship must please to bear in mind that Captain Pollexfen in his letter makes no absolute mention of the diamond by name; he merely writes of it vaguely under certain initials, and, if called upon, how could you prove that he intended those initials to stand for the words *Great Mogul Diamond*, and not for something altogether different? If M. Platzoff were your ladyship's next-door neighbour, and you knew for certain that he had the diamond still in his possession, you could

only get it from him as he himself got it from your son — by subterfuge and artifice. Your ladyship will please to observe that I have put forward no opinion in the case. I have merely offered a statement of plain facts as they show themselves on the surface. With those facts before you it rests with your ladyship to decide what further steps you wish taken in the matter."

"My good Madgin, do you know what it is to hate?" demanded Lady Pollexfen. "To hate with a hatred that dwarfs all other passions of the soul, and makes them pigmies by comparison? If you know this, you know the feeling with which I regard M. Platzoff. If you want the key to the feeling, you have it in the fact that his accursed hands robbed my dead son: even then you must have a mother's heart to feel all that I feel." She paused for a moment as if to recover breath; then she resumed. "See you, Mr. Solomon Madgin, I have a conviction, an intuition, call it what you will, that this Russian scoundrel is still alive. That is the first fact you have got to find out. The next is, where he is now residing. Then you will have

to ascertain whether he has the diamond still in his possession, and if so, by what means it can be recovered. Only recover it for me—I ask not how or by what means—only put into my hands the diamond that was stolen off my son's breast as he lay dead; and the day you do that, my good Madgin, I will present you with a cheque for five thousand pounds!"

Mr. Madgin sat like one astounded; the power of reply seemed taken from him. "Go now," said Lady Pollexfen, after a few moments. "Ordinary business is out of the question to-day. Go home and carefully digest what I have just said to you. That you are a man of resources, I know well; had you not been so, I would not have employed you in this matter. Come to me to-morrow, next day, next week—when you like; only don't come barren of ideas; don't come without a plan, likely or unlikely, of some sort of a campaign."

Mr. Madgin rose and swept his papers mechanically into his bag. "Your ladyship said five thousand pounds, if I mistake not?" he stammered out.

"A cheque for five thousand pounds shall be yours on the day you bring me the diamond. Is not my word sufficient, or do you wish to have it under bond and seal?" she asked with some hauteur.

"Your ladyship's word is an all-sufficient bond," answered Mr. Madgin, with sweet humility. He paused with the handle of the door in his hand. "Supposing I were to see my way to carry out your ladyship's wishes in this respect," he said deferentially, "or even to carry out a portion of them only, still it could not be done without expense—not without considerable expense, maybe."

"I give you carte-blanche as regards expenses," said her ladyship with decision.

Then Mr. Madgin gave a farewell duck of the head, and went. He took his way homeward through the park, like a man walking in his sleep. With wide-open eyes, and hat well set on the back of his head, with his blue bag in one hand, and his umbrella under his arm, he trudged onward, even after he got into the busy streets of the little town, without seeing

anything or anybody. What he saw, he saw introspectively. On the one hand glittered the tempting bait held out by Lady Pollexfen; on the other loomed the dark problem that had to be solved before he could call the golden apple his.

"The most arrant wild-goose chase that ever I heard of in all my life," he muttered to himself, as he halted at his own door. "Not a single ray of light anywhere—not one."

"Popsey," he called out to his daughter, when he got inside, "bring the decanter of gin, some cold water, an ounce of bird's-eye, and a clean churchwarden, into the office; and don't let me be disturbed by any one for four hours."

CHAPTER V.

MR. MADGIN AT THE HELM.

Mr. Madgin's house stood somewhat back from the main street of Tydsbury. It was an old-fashioned house, of modest exterior, and had an air of being elbowed into the background by the smarter and more modern domiciles on each side of it. Its steep overhanging roof, and porched doorway, gave it a sleepy, reposeful look, as though it were watching the on-goings of the little town through half-closed lids, and taking small cognizance thereof.

Entering from the street through a little wooden gateway of a bright green colour, a narrow pathway, paved with round pebbles that were very trying to people with tender feet, conducted you to the front door, on which shone a brass plate of surpassing brightness, whereon was inscribed:—

Mr. Solomon Madgin,
General Agent,
Valuer, &c.

The house was a double-fronted one. On one side of the passage as you went in was the office, on the other side was the family sitting-room. Not that Mr. Madgin's family was a large one. It consisted merely of himself, his daughter Mirpah, and one strong servant girl with an unlimited capacity for hard work. Mirpah Madgin deserves some notice at our hands.

She was a tall, superb-looking young woman of two-and-twenty, and bore not the slightest resemblance in person, whatever she might do in mind or disposition, to that sly old fox her father. Mirpah's mother had been of Jewish extraction, and in Mirpah's face you read the unmistakable signs of that grand style of beauty which is everywhere associated with the down-trodden race. She moved about the little house in her inexpensive prints and muslins like a dis-

crowned queen. That she had reached the age of two-and-twenty without having been in love was no source of surprise to those who knew her, for Mirpah Madgin hardly looked like a girl who would marry a poor clerk or a petty tradesman, or who could ever sink into the common-place drudge of a hand-to-mouth household. She looked like a girl who would some day be claimed by a veritable hero of romance—by some Ivanhoe of modern life, well endowed with this world's goods—who would wed her, and ride away with her to the fairy realms of Tyburnia and Rotten Row.

And yet, truth to tell, the thread of romance inwoven with the composition of Mirpah Madgin was a very slender one. In so far she belied her own beauty. For a young woman she was strangely practical, and that in a curiously unfeminine way. She was her father's managing clerk and *alter ego*. The housewifely acts of sewing and cooking she held in utter distaste. For domestic management in any of its forms she had no faculty, unless it were for that portion of it which necessitated a watchful eye upon

the purse-strings. Such an eye she had been trained to use since she was quite a girl, and Mirpah the superb could on occasion haggle over a penny as keenly as the most ancient fishwife in Tydsbury market.

At five minutes past nine precisely, six mornings out of every seven, Mirpah Madgin sat down in her father's office and proceeded to open the letters. Mr. Madgin's business was a multifarious one. Not only was he Lady Pollexfen's general agent and man of business, although that was his most onerous and lucrative appointment, and the one that engaged most of his time and thoughts, but he was also agent for several lesser concerns, always contriving to have a number of small irons in the fire at one time. Much of Mr. Madgin's time was spent in the collection of rents and in out-door work generally, so that nearly the whole of the office duties devolved upon Mirpah, and by no clerk could they have been more efficiently performed. She made up and balanced the numerous accounts with which Mr. Madgin had to deal in one shape or another. Three-fourths of the letters

that emanated from Mr. Madgin's office were written by her. From long practice she had learned to write so like her father that only an expert could have detected the difference between the two hands; and she invariably signed herself "Yours truly, Solomon Madgin." Indeed, so accustomed was she to writing her father's name that in her correspondence with her brother, who was an actor in London, she more frequently than not signed it in place of her own; so that Madgin junior had to look whether the letter was addressed to him as a son or as a brother before he could tell by whom it had been written.

As her father's assistant Mirpah was happy after a quiet, staid sort of fashion. The energies of her nature found their vent in the busy life in which she took so much delight. She was not at all sentimental: she was not the least bit romantic. She was thoroughly practical, and was as keen in money-making as her father himself. Yet with all this Mirpah Madgin could be charitable on occasion, and was by no means deficient of high and generous impulses—only she

never allowed her impulses to interfere with "business."

Mr. Madgin never took any important step without first consulting his daughter. Herein he acted wisely, for Mirpah's clear good sense, and feminine quickness at penetrating motives where he himself was sometimes at fault, had often proved invaluable to him in difficult transactions. In a matter of so much moment as that of the Great Mogul Diamond it was not likely that he would be long contented without taking her into his confidence. He had scarcely finished his first pipe when he heard her opening the door with her latch-key, and his face brightened at the sound. She had been on one of those holy pilgrimages in which all who are thus privileged take so much delight: she had been to the bank to increase the little store which lay there already in her father's name. She came into the room tired but smiling. A white straw bonnet, a black silk mantle, and a muslin dress small in pattern, formed the chief items of her quiet attire. She was carefully gloved and booted; but to whatever she wore Mirpah im-

parted an air of distinction that put it at once beyond a suggestion of improvement.

"Smoking at this time of day, papa!" exclaimed Mirpah. "And the gin-bottle out, too! Are we about to retire on our fortunes, or what does it all mean?"

"It means, girl, that I have got one of the hardest nuts to crack that was ever put before me. If I crack it, I get five thousand pounds for the kernel. If I don't crack it—but that's a possibility I can't bear to think about."

"Five thousand pounds! That would indeed be a kernel worth having. My teeth are younger than yours, and perhaps I may be able to help you."

Mr. Madgin smoked in silence for a little while, while Mirpah toyed patiently with her bonnet strings. "The nut is simply this," said the old man at last: "In India, twenty years ago, a diamond was stolen from a dying man. I am now told to find the thief, to obtain from him the diamond either by fair means or foul—supposing always that he is still alive and has the diamond still in his possession—and on the

day I give the stone to its rightful owner the aforementioned five thousand pounds become mine."

"A grand prize, and one worth striving for!"

"Even so; but how can I strive, when I have nothing to strive against? I am like a man put into a dark room to fight a duel. I cannot find my antagonist. I grope about, not knowing whether he is on the right hand of me or the left, before me or behind me. In fact, I am utterly at sea; and the more I think about the matter the more hopelessly bewildered I seem to become."

"Two heads are better than one, papa. Let me try to help you. Tell me the case from beginning to end, with all the details as they are known to you."

Mr. Madgin willingly complied, and related *in extenso* all that he had heard that morning at Dupley Walls. The little man had a high opinion of his daughter's sagacity. That such an opinion was in nowise lessened by the result of the present case will be best seen by the following excerpts from Mr. Madgin's diary, which, as having a

particular bearing on the case of the Great Mogul Diamond, we proceed at once to lay before the reader:—

"Excerpts from the Diary of Mr. Solomon Madgin.

"July 9th, Evening.—After the wonderful revelation made to me by Lady Pollexfen this morning, I came home, and got behind a churchwarden, and set my wits to work to think the matter out. I shut my eyes and puffed away for an hour and a half, but at the end of that time I was as much in a fog as when I first sat down. Nowhere could I discern a single ray of light. Then in came Mirpah, and when she begged of me to tell her the story, I was glad to do so, remembering how often she had helped me through a puzzle in days gone by—but none of them of such magnitude as this one. So I told her everything as far as it was known to myself. After that we discussed the whole case carefully step by step. The immediate result of this discussion was, that as soon as tea was over, I went as far as the White

Hart tavern in search of Sergeant Nicholas. I found him on the bowling-green watching the players. I called for a quart of old ale and some tobacco, and before long we were as cosy as two old cronies who have known each other for twenty years. The morning had shown me that the Sergeant was a man of some intelligence and of much worldly experience; and when I had lowered myself imperceptibly to the level of his intellect, so as to put him more completely at his ease, I had no difficulty in inducing him to talk freely and fully on that one subject which, for the last few hours, has had for me an interest paramount to that of any other. My primary object was to induce him to retail to me every scrap of information that he could call to mind respecting the Russian, Platzoff, who is said to have stolen the diamond. It was Mirpah's opinion and mine, that he must be in possession of many bits of special knowledge, such as might seem of no consequence to him, but which might be invaluable to us in our search, and such as he would naturally leave out of the narrative he told Lady Pollexfen. The

result proved that our opinion was well founded. I did not leave the sergeant till I had pumped him thoroughly dry. (Mem.: an excellent tap of old ale at the White Hart. Must try some of it at home.)

"I found Mirpah watering her geraniums in the back garden. She was all impatience to learn the result of my interview. I am thankful that increasing years have not impaired my memory. I repeated to Mirpah every word bearing on the case in point that the sergeant had confided to me. Then I waited in silence for her opinion. I was anxious to know whether it coincided in any way with my own. I am happy to think that it did coincide. Father and daughter were agreed.

"'I think that you have done a very good afternoon's work, papa,' said Mirpah, after a few moments given to silent thought. 'After a lapse of twenty years, it is not likely that Sergeant Nicholas should have a very clear recollection of any conversation that he may have overheard between Captain Pollexfen and M. Platzoff. Indeed, had he pretended to repeat

any such conversation, I should have felt strongly inclined to doubt the truth of his entire narrative. Happily he disclaims any such abnormal powers of memory. He can remember nothing but a chance phrase or two which some secondary circumstance fixed indelibly on his mind. But he can remember a great number of little facts bearing on the relations between his master and the Russian. These facts, considered singly, may seem of little or no importance, but taken in the aggregate, and regarded as so many bits of mosaic work forming part of a complicated whole, they assume an aspect of far greater importance. In any case, they put us on a trail, which may turn out to be the right one or the wrong one, but which at present certainly seems to me worth following up. Finally, they all tend to deepen our first suspicion that M. Platzoff was neither more nor less than a political refugee. The next point is to ascertain whether he is still alive.'

"Here again the clear logical intellect of Mirpah (so like my own) came to my assistance. Before parting for the night we were agreed as

to what our mode of procedure ought to be on the morrow. This most extraordinary case engages all my thoughts. I am afraid that I shall not be able to sleep much to-night.

"July 10th.—I owe it to Mirpah to say that it was entirely in consequence of a hint from her that I went at an early hour this morning to the office of the *Tydsbury Courier* there to consult a a file of that newspaper. Six months ago the daughter of Sir John Pennythorne was married to a rich London gentleman. Mirpah had read the account of the festivities consequent on that event, and seemed to remember that among other friends of the bridegroom invited down to Finch Hall was some foreign gentleman who was stated in the newspaper to belong to the Russian Legation in London. Acting on Mirpah's hint, I went back through the files of the *Courier* till I lighted on the account of the wedding. True enough, among other guests on that occasion, I found catalogued the name of a certain Monsieur H—— of the Russian Embassy. I had got all I wanted from the *Tydsbury Courier*.

"My next proceeding was to hasten up to

Dupley Walls, to obtain an interview with Lady Pollexfen, and to induce her ladyship to write to Sir John Pennythorne asking him to write to the aforesaid M. H——, and inquire whether, among the archives (I think that is the correct word) of the Embassy, they had any record of a political refugee by name Paul Platzoff, who, twenty years ago, was in India, &c. I had considerable difficulty in persuading her ladyship to write, but at last the letter was sent. I await the result anxiously. The chances seem to me something like a thousand to one against our inquiry being productive of any tangible result. What I dread more than all is that M. Platzoff is no longer among the living.

"July 20th.—Nine days without a word from Sir John Pennythorne, except to say that he had written his friend Monsieur H—— as requested by Lady Pollexfen. I began to despair. Each morning I inquired of her ladyship whether she had received any reply from Sir John, and each morning her ladyship said: 'I have had no reply, Mr. Madgin, beyond the one you have already seen.'

"Certain matters connected with a lease took me up to Dupley Walls this afternoon for the second time to-day. The afternoon post came in while I was there. Among other letters was one from Sir John Pennythorne, which, when she had read it, her ladyship tossed over to me. It enclosed one from M. H—— to Sir John. It was on the latter that I pounced. It was written in French, but even at the first hasty reading I could make it out sufficiently to know that it was of far greater importance than even in my wildest dreams I had dared to imagine.

"I never saw Lady Pollexfen so excited as she was during the few moments which I took up in reading the letter. During the nine days that had elapsed since the writing of her letter to Sir John she had treated me somewhat slightingly; there was, or so I fancied, a spice of contempt in her manner towards me. The step I had induced her to take in writing to Sir John had met with no approbation at her hands; it had seemed to her an utterly futile and ridiculous thing to do; therefore was I now propor-

tionately well pleased to find that my wild idea had been productive of such excellent fruit.

"'I must certainly compliment you, Mr. Madgin, on the success of your first step,' said her ladyship. 'It was like one of the fine intuitions of genius to imagine that you saw a way to reach M. Platzoff through the Russian Embassy. You have been fully justified by the result. Madgin, the man yet lives!—the man whose sacrilegious hands robbed my dead son of that which he had left as a sacred gift to his mother. May the curse of a widowed mother attend him through life! Let me hear the letter again, Madgin; or stay, I will read it myself: your French is execrable. Ha, ha! Monsieur Paul Platzoff, we shall have our revenge out of you yet.'

"She read the letter through for the second time with a sort of deliberate eagerness which showed me how deeply interested her heart was in the affair. She dropped her eye-glass and gave a great sigh when she came to the end of it. 'And what do you propose to do next, Mr. Madgin?' she asked. 'Your conduct so far

satisfies me that I cannot do better than leave the case entirely in your hands.'

"'With all due deference to your ladyship,' I replied, 'I think that my next step ought to be to reconnoitre the enemy's camp.'

"'Exactly my own thought,' said her ladyship. 'When can you start for Windermere?'

"'To-morrow morning, at nine.'

"After a little more conversation I left her ladyship. She seemed in better spirits than I had seen her for a long time.

"I need not attempt to describe dear Mirpah's delight when I read over to her the contents of Monsieur H.'s note. She put her arms round me and kissed me. 'The five thousand pounds shall yet be yours, papa,' she said. Stranger things than that have come to pass before now. But I am working only for her and James. Should I ever be so fortunate as to touch the five thousand pounds, one-half of it will go to form a dowry for my Mirpah. Below is a free translation of the business part of M. H.'s letter, which was simply an extract from some secret ledger kept at the Embassy:—

"'Platzoff, Paul. A Russian by birth and a conspirator by choice. Born in Moscow in 1802, his father being a rich leather-merchant of that city. Implicated at the age of nineteen in sundry insurrectionary movements; tried, and sentenced to three years' imprisonment in a military fortress. After his release, left Russia without permission, having first secretly transferred his property into foreign securities. Went to Paris. Issued a scurrilous pamphlet directed against his Majesty the Emperor. Spent several years in travel,—now in Europe, now in the East, striving wherever he went to promulgate his revolutionary ideas. More than suspected of being a member of several secret political societies. Has resided for the last few years at Bon Repos, on the banks of Windermere, from which place he communicates constantly with other characters as desperate as himself. Russia has no more bitter and determined enemy than Paul Platzoff. He is at once clever and unscrupulous. While he lives he will not cease to conspire.'

"After this followed a description of Platzoff's

personal appearance, which it is needless to transcribe here.

"I start for Windermere by the first train to-morrow."

CHAPTER VI.

MR. MADGIN'S SECRET JOURNEY.

Mr. Madgin left home by an early train on the morning of the day following that on which Lady Pollexfen had received a reply from Sir John Pennythorne. His first intention had been to make the best of his way to Windermere, and there ascertain the exact locality of Bon Repos. But a fresh view of the case presented itself to his mind as he lay thinking in bed. Instead of taking the train for the north, he took one for the south, and found himself at Euston as the London clocks were striking twelve. After an early dinner, and a careful consultation of the Post Office Directory, Mr. Madgin ordered a hansom, and was driven to Hatton-garden, in and about which unfragrant locality the diamond merchants most do congregate. After due inquiries made and an-

swered, Mr. Madgin was driven eastward for another mile or more. Here a similar set of inquiries elicited a similar set of answers. Mr. Madgin went back to his hotel well pleased with his day's work.

His inquiries had satisfied him that no green diamond of the size and value attributed to the Great Mogul had either been seen or heard of in the London market during the last twenty years. It still remained to test the foreign markets in the same way. Mr. Madgin's idea was that this work could be done better by some trustworthy agent well acquainted with the trade than by himself. He accordingly left instructions with an eminent diamond merchant to have all needful inquiries made at Paris, Amsterdam, and St. Petersburgh, as to whether such a stone as the Great Mogul had come under the cognizance of the trade any time during the last twenty years. The result of the inquiry was to be communicated to Mr. Madgin by letter.

Next day Mr. Madgin journeyed down to Windermere. Arrived at Bowness, he found no

difficulty in ascertaining the exact locality of Bon Repos, the house and its owner being known by sight or repute to almost every inhabitant of the little town. Mr. Madgin stopped all night at Bowness. Next morning he hired a small boat, and was pulled across the lake to a point about half a mile below Bon Repos, and there he landed.

Mr. Madgin was travelling *incog.* The name upon his portmanteau was "Jared Deedes, Esq." He was dressed in a suit of glossy black, with a white neckcloth, and gold-rimmed spectacles. He had quite an episcopal air. He did not call himself a clergyman, but people were at liberty to accept him as one if they chose.

Assisted by the most unimpeachable of malaccas, Mr. Madgin took the high-road that wound round the grounds of Bon Repos. But so completely was the house hidden in its nest of greenery that the chimney-pots were all of it that was visible from the road. But under a spur of the hill by which the house was shut in at the back Mr. Madgin found a tiny hamlet of a dozen houses, by far the most imposing

of which was the village inn—hotel, it called itself, and showed to the world the sign of The Jolly Fishers. Into this humble hostelry Mr. Madgin marched without hesitation, and called for some refreshment. So impressed was the landlord with the clerical appearance of his guest, that he whipped off his apron, ushered him into the state parlour, and made haste to wait upon him himself. He, the guest, had actually called for a bottle of the best dry sherry, and when the landlord took it in he invited him to fetch another glass, and come and join him over it. Mr. Jared Deedes was a tourist—well-to-do, without doubt; the landlord could see as much as that—and having never visited Lakeland before, he was naturally delighted with the freshness and novelty of everything that he saw. The change from London life was so thorough, so complete in every respect, that he could hardly believe he had left the great Babel no longer ago than yesterday. It seemed years since he had been there. He had thought Bowness a charming spot, but this little nook surpassed Bowness, inasmuch as it

was still farther removed and shut out from the frivolities and follies of the great world. Here one was almost alone with Nature and her wondrous works. Then Mr. Deedes filled up his own glass and that of the landlord.

"Perhaps, sir, you would like to stay here for a night or two," suggested the host timidly; "we have a couple of spare beds."

"Nothing would please me better," answered Mr. Deedes, with solemn alacrity. "I feel that the healthful air of these hills is doing me an immensity of good. Kindly send to the Crown at Bowness for my portmanteau, and ascertain what you have in the house for dinner."

After a while came dinner, and a little later on, Mr. Deedes having expressed a desire to see something of the lake, the landlord sent to borrow a boat, and then took his guest for an hour's row on Windermere. From the water they had a capital view of the low white front of Bon Repos. There were two gentlemen smoking on the terrace. The lesser of the two, said the landlord, was M. Platzoff. The taller man was Captain Ducie, at present a guest at

Bon Repos. Then the landlord wandered off into a long rambling account of Bon Repos and its owner. Mr. Deedes was much interested in hearing about the eccentric habits and strange mode of life of M. Platzoff, with the details of which the landlord was as thoroughly acquainted as though he had formed one of the household. Their row on the lake was prolonged for a couple of hours, and Mr. Deedes went back to the hotel much edified.

In the dusk of evening he encountered Cleon, M. Platzoff's valet, as he was lounging slowly down the village street on his way to the Jolly Fishers. Mr. Deedes scrutinized the dark-skinned servant narrowly in passing. "The face of a cunning unscrupulous rascal, if ever I saw one," he muttered to himself. "Nevertheless, I must make his acquaintance."

And he did make his acquaintance. As Cleon and the landlord sat hob-nobbing together in the little snuggery behind the bar, Mr. Deedes put in his head to ask a question of the latter. Thereupon the landlord begged permission to introduce his friend Mr. Cleon to the notice of

his guest, Mr. Deedes. The two men bowed, Mr. Cleon rather sulkily; but Mr. Deedes was all affability and smiling *bonhommie*. He had several questions to ask, and he sat down on the only vacant chair in the little room. He wanted to know the distance to Keswick; how much higher Helvellyn was than Fairfield; whether it was possible to get any potted char for breakfast; and so on; on all which questions both Cleon and the landlord had something to say. But talking being dry work, as Mr. Deedes smilingly observed, brought naturally to mind the fact that the landlord had some excellent dry sherry, and that one could not do better this warm evening than have another bottle fetched up out of the cool depths of the cellar. Mr. Cleon, being pressed, was nothing loth to join Mr. Deedes over this bottle. Mr. Deedes, without condescending into familiarity, made himself very agreeable, but did not sit long. After imbibing a couple of glasses, he bade the landlord and the valet an affable good-night, and went off decorously to bed.

Mr. Deedes was up betimes next morning, and

took a three miles' trudge over the hills before breakfast. He spent a quiet day mooning about the neighbourhood, and really enjoying himself after his own fashion, although his mind was busily engaged all the time in trying to solve the mystery of the Great Diamond. In the evening he took care to have a few pleasant words with Cleon, and then early to bed. Two more days passed away after a similar quiet fashion, and then Mr. Deedes began to chafe inwardly at the small progress he was making.

Although he had been so successful in tracing out M. Platzoff, and in working the case up to its present point in a remarkably short space of time, he acknowledged to himself that he was completely baffled when he came to consider what his next step ought to be. He could not, indeed, see his way to a single step beyond his present stand-point. Much as he seemed to have gained at a single leap, was he in reality one hair's-breadth nearer the secret object of his quest than on that day when the name of the Great Mogul Diamond first made music in his ears? He doubted it greatly.

When he first decided on coming down to Bon Repos he trusted that the chapter of accidents and the good fortune which had so far attended him would somehow put it in his power to scrape an acquaintance with M. Platzoff himself, and such an acquaintance once made, it would be his own fault if, in one way or another, he did not make it subservient to the ambitious end he had in view. But in M. Platzoff he found a recluse: a man who made no fresh acquaintanceships; who held the whole tourist tribe in horror, and who even kept himself aloof from such of the neighbouring families as might be considered his equals in social position. It was quite evident to Mr. Deedes that he might reside close to Bon Repos for twenty years, and at the end of that time not have succeeded in addressing half a dozen words to its owner.

Then again he had succeeded little better with regard to Cleon than with regard to Cleon's master. All his advances, made with a mixture of affability and *bonhommie* which Mr. Deedes flattered himself was irresistible with most people, were productive of little or no effect upon the

mulatto. He received them, not with suspicion, for he had nothing of which to suspect harmless Mr. Deedes, but with a sort of sulky indifference, as though he considered them rather a nuisance than otherwise, and would have preferred their being offered to anyone else. Did Mr. Deedes, in conversation with him and the landlord, venture to bring the talk round to Bon Repos and M. Platzoff; did he hazard the remark that since his arrival in Lakeland several people had spoken to him of the strange character and eccentric mode of life of Mr. Cleon's employer—he was met with a stony silence, which told him as plainly as any words could have done that M. Platzoff and his affairs were matters that in no wise concerned him. It was quite evident that neither the Russian nor his dark-skinned valet was of any avail for the furtherance of that scheme which had brought Mr. Deedes all the way to the wilds of Westmoreland.

He began to despair, and was on the point of writing to Mirpah, thinking that her shrewd woman's wit might be able to suggest some stratagem or mode of attack other than that

made use of by him, when suddenly a prospect opened before him such as in his wildest dreams of success he dared not have bodied forth. He was not slow to avail himself of it.

CHAPTER VII.

ENTER MADGIN, JUNIOR.

"Beg your pardon, sir," said the landlord of the Jolly Fishers one morning to his guest, Mr. Deedes, "but I think I have more than once heard you say that you came from London?"

"I do come from London," answered Mr. Deedes; "I am a Cockney born and bred. I came direct from London to Windermere. But why do you ask?"

"Simply, sir, because they are in want of a footman at Bon Repos, to fill up the place of one who has gone away to get married. Mossoo Platzoff don't like advertising for servants, and Mr. Cleon is at a loss where to find a fellow that can wait at table and has some manners about him. You see, sir, the country louts about here are neither useful nor ornamental in a gentleman's house. Now, sir, it struck me that among your

friends you might perhaps know some gentleman who would be glad to recommend a respectable man for such a place. Must have a good character from his last situation, and be able to wait at table; and I hope, sir, you will pardon the liberty I've taken in mentioning it to you."

Mr. Deedes was holding up a glass of wine to the light as the landlord brought his little speech to a close. He sipped the wine slowly, with his eyes bent on the floor; then he put down the glass and rubbed his hands softly one within the other. Then he spoke.

"It happens, singularly enough," he said, "that a particular friend of mine—Mr. Madgin, a gentleman, I daresay, whose name you have never heard—spoke to me only three weeks ago about one of his people for whom he was desirous of obtaining another situation, he himself being about to break up his establishment and go to reside on the Continent. I will write Mr. Madgin to-night, and if the young man has not engaged himself I will ask my friend to send him down here. He will have a first-class testi-

monial, and I have no doubt he would suit M. Platzoff admirably. I am obliged to you, landlord, for mentioning this matter to me."

Mr. Deedes went off at once to his room, and wrote and despatched the following letter:—

"My dear Boy,—I saw by an advertisement in last week's *Era* that you are still out of an engagement. I have an opening for you down here in a drama of real life. It will be greatly to your advantage to accept it, so do not hesitate for a moment. Come without delay. Book yourself from Euston-square to Windermere. Take steamer from the latter place to Newby-bridge. There, at the hotel, await my arrival. Bear in mind that down here my name is *Mr. Jared Deedes*, and that yours is *James Jasmin*, a footman, at present out of a situation. To a person of your intelligence I need not say more.

"Your affectionate father,

"S. M.

"N.B.—This communication is secret and confidential. All expenses paid. Do not on

any account fail to come. I will be at the Newby-bridge Hotel on Thursday morning at eleven."

This letter he addressed, "Mr. James Madgin, Royal Tabard Theatre, Southwark, London." Having posted it with his own hands, he went for a long solitary ramble among the hills. He wanted to think out and elaborate the great scheme that had unfolded itself before his dazzled eyes while the landlord was talking to him. He had seen the whole compass of it at a glance; he wanted now to consider it in detail. There was an elation in his eye and an elasticity in his tread that made him seem ten years younger than on the previous day.

He had requested the landlord to tell Mr. Cleon what steps he was about to take with the view of supplying M. Platzoff with a new footman. In these proceedings the mulatto acquiesced ungraciously. Truth to tell, he was bored by Mr. Deedes and his friendly officiousness, and although secretly glad that the trouble of hunting out a new servant had been taken off

his hands, he was not a man willingly to acknowledge his obligations to another.

Mr. Deedes set out immediately after breakfast on Thursday morning, and having walked to the Ferry Hotel, he took the steamer from that place to Newby-bridge. Mr. James Jasmin was at the landing-stage awaiting his arrival. After shaking hands heartily, and inquiring as to each other's health, the two wandered off arm in arm down one of the quiet country roads. Then Mr. Deedes explained to Mr. Jasmin his reasons for sending for him from London, and with what view he was desirous of introducing him into Bon Repos. The younger man listened attentively. When the elder one had done, he said :—

"Father, this is a very pretty scheme of yours, but it seems to me that I am to be nothing more than a catspaw in the affair. You have only given me half your confidence. You must give me the whole of it before I can agree to act as you wish. I want to hear the whole history of the case, and how you came to be mixed up in it. Further—I want to know how

much Lady Pollexfen intends to give you in case you succeed in getting back the Diamond, and what my share of the recompense is to be?"

"Dear! dear! what a headstrong boy you are!" moaned Mr. Deedes. "Why can't you be content with what I tell you, and leave the rest to me?"

The younger man made no reply in words, but turned abruptly on his heel and began to walk back.

"James! James!" cried the old man, catching his son by the coat tails, "do not go off in that way. It shall be as you wish. I will tell you everything. You headstrong boy! Do you want to break your poor father's heart?"

"Break your fiddlestick!" said Mr. Jasmin, irreverently. "Let us sit down on this green bank, and you shall tell me all about the Diamond while I try the quality of these cigars. I am all attention."

Thus adjured, Mr. Deedes sighed deeply, wiped his forehead with his handkerchief, looked medi-

tatively into his hat for a few seconds, and then began.

Beginning with the narrative of Sergeant Nicholas, Mr. Deedes went on from that point to detail by what means he had discovered that M. Platzoff was still alive and where he was now living. Then he told of his coming down to Bon Repos and all that had happened to him since that time. He had already told his son with what view he had sent for him from London—that not being able to make any further headway in the case himself, he was desirous of introducing his dear James, in the guise of a servant, into Bon Repos, as an agent on whose integrity and cleverness he could alike depend.

"But you have not yet told your dear James the amount of the honorarium you will be entitled to receive in case you recover the stolen Diamond."

"What do you say to five thousand pounds?" asked Mr. Deedes, in a solemn whisper.

The younger man opened his eyes. "Hum! A very pretty little amount," he said, "but I have yet to learn what proportion of that sum

will percolate into the pockets of this child. In other words, what is to be my share of the plunder?"

"Plunder, my dear boy, is a strange word to make use of. Pray be more particular in your choice of terms. The mercenary view you take of the case is very distressing to my feelings. A proper recompense for your time and trouble it was my intention to make you; but as regards the five thousand pounds, I hoped to be able to fund it *in toto*, to add it to my little capital, and to leave it intact for those who will come after me. And you know very well, James, that there will only be you and Mirpah to divide whatever the old man may die possessed of."

"But, my dear dad, you are not going to die for these five-and-twenty years. My present necessities are imperative: like the daughters of the horse-leech, they are continually asking for more."

"James! James! how changed you are from the dear unselfish boy of ten years ago!"

"And very proper too. But do let us be business-like, if you please. The *rôle* of the

'heavy father' doesn't suit you at all. Keep sentiment out of the case, and then we shall do very well. Listen to my ultimatum. The day I place the Great Mogul Diamond in your hands you must give me a cheque for fifteen hundred pounds."

"Fifteen hundred pounds!" gasped the old man. "James! James! do you wish to see me die in a workhouse?"

"Fifteen hundred pounds. Not one penny less," reiterated Madgin, junior. "What do you mean by a workhouse? You will then have three thousand five hundred pounds to the good, and will have got the job done very cheaply. But there is another side to the question. Both you and I have been counting our chickens before they are hatched. Suppose I don't succeed in laying hold of the Diamond—what then? And, mind you, I don't think I shall succeed. To begin with—I don't half believe in the existence of your big Diamond. It looks to me very much like a hoax from beginning to end. But granting the existence of the stone, and that it was stolen by your Russian friend, are not the

chances a thousand to one either that he has disposed of it long ago, or elset hat he has hidden it away in some place so safe that the cleverest burglar in London would be puzzled to get at it. Suppose, for instance, that it is deposited by him at his banker's: in that case, what are your expectations worth? Not a brass farthing. No, my dear dad, the risk of failure is too great, outweighing, as it does, the chances of success a thousandfold, for me to have the remotest hope of ever fingering the fifteen hundred pounds. I have, therefore, to appraise my time and services as the hero of a losing cause. I say the hero; for I certainly consider that I am about to play the leading part in the forthcoming drama—that I am the bright particular 'star' round which the lesser lights will all revolve. Such being the case, I do not consider that I am rating my services too highly when I name two hundred guineas as the lowest sum for which I am willing to play the part of James Jasmin, footman, spy, and amateur detective."

Again Mr. Deedes gasped for breath. He opened his mouth, but words refused to come.

He shook his head with a fine tragic air, and wiped his eyes.

"Take an hour or two to consider of it," said the son, indulgently. "If you agree to my proposition, I shall want it put down in black and white, and properly signed. If you do not agree to it, I start back for town by this night's mail."

"James, James, you are one too many for me!" said the old man, pathetically. "Let us go and dine."

The first thing Madgin junior did after they got back to the hotel was to place before his father a sheet of note paper, an inkstand, and a pen. "Write," he said; and the old man wrote to his dictation:—

"I, Solomon Madgin, on the part of Lady Pollexfen, of Dupley Walls, do hereby promise and bind myself to pay over into the hands of my son, James Madgin, the sum of fifteen hundred pounds (1500*l.*) on the day that the aforesaid James Madgin places safely in my hands the stone known as the Great Mogul Diamond.

"Should the aforesaid James Madgin, from causes beyond his own control, find himself unable to obtain possession of the said Diamond, I, Solomon Madgin, bind myself to reimburse him in the sum of two hundred guineas (210*l.*) as payment in full for the time and labour expended by him in his search for the Great Mogul Diamond.

(Signed) "Solomon Madgin.

"July 21st, 18—."

Mr. Madgin threw down the pen when he had signed his name, and chuckled quietly to himself. "You don't think, dear boy, that a foolish paper like that would be worth anything in a court of law?" he said, interrogatively.

"As a legal document it would probably be laughed at," said Madgin junior. "But in another point of view I have no doubt that it would carry with it a certain moral weight. For instance, suppose the claim embodied in this paper were disputed, and I were compelled to resort to ulterior measures, the written promise given by you might not be found legally binding,

but, on the other hand, neither Lady Pollexfen nor you would like to see that document copied *in extenso* into all the London papers, nor the whole of your remarkable scheme for the recovery of the Great Mogul Diamond detailed by the plaintiff in open court, to be talked over next morning through the length and breadth of England. 'Extraordinary Case between a Lady of Rank and an Actor.' How would that read, eh?"

"My dear James, let me shake hands with you," exclaimed the old man with emotion. "You are a most extraordinary young man. I am proud of you, my dear boy, I am indeed. What a pity that you adopted the stage as your profession! You ought to have entered the law. In the law you would have risen,—nothing could have kept you down."

"That is as it may be," returned James. "If I am satisfied with my profession you have no cause to grumble. But here comes dinner."

Mr. James Madgin was first low comedian at one of the transpontine theatres. The height of his ambition was to have the offer of an engage-

ment from one of the West-end managers. Only give him the opportunity, and he felt sure that he could work his way with a cultivated audience. When a lad of sixteen he had run away from home with a company of strolling players, and from that time he had been a devoted follower of Thespis. He had roughed it patiently in the provinces for years, his only consolation during a long season of poverty and neglect arising from the conviction that he was slowly but surely improving himself in the difficult art he had chosen as his mode of earning his daily bread. When the manager of the Royal Tabard, then on a provincial tour, picked him out from all his brother actors, and offered him a metropolitan engagement, James Madgin thought himself on the high road to fame and fortune. Time had served to show him the fallacy of his expectations. He had been four years at the Royal Tabard, during the whole of which time he had been in receipt of a tolerable salary for his position—that of first low comedian; but fame and fortune seemed still as far from his grasp as ever. With opportunity given

him, he had hoped one day to electrify the town. But that hope was now buried very deep down in his heart, and if ever brought out, like an "old property," to be looked at and turned about, its only greeting was a quiet sneer, after which it was relegated to the limbo whence it had been disinterred. James Madgin had given up the expectation of ever shining in the theatrical system as a "great star;" he was trying to content himself with the thought of living and dying a respectable mediocrity,—useful, ornamental even, in his proper sphere, but certainly never destined to set the Thames on fire. The manager of the Tabard had recently died, and at present James Madgin was in want of an engagement.

As father and son sat together at table, you might, knowing their relationship to each other, have readily detected a certain likeness between them; but it was a likeness of expression rather than of features, and would scarcely have been noticed by any casual observer. Madgin junior was a fresh-complexioned, sprightly young fellow of six or seven-and-twenty, with dark,

frank-looking eyes, a prominent nose, and thin mobile lips. He had dark-brown hair, closely cropped; and, as became one of his profession, he was guiltless of either beard or moustache. Like Mirpah, he inherited his eyes and nose from his mother, but in no other feature could he be said to resemble his beautiful sister.

Father and son were very merry over dinner, and did not spare the wine afterwards. The old man could not sufficiently admire the shrewd business-like aptitude shown by his son in their recent conference. The latter's extraction of a written promise from his own father was an action that the elder man could fully appreciate; it was a stroke of business that touched him to the heart, and made him feel proud of his "dear James."

"But how will you manage about waiting at table?" asked Solomon of his son as they strolled out together to smoke their cigars on the little bridge by the hotel. "I am afraid that you will betray your ignorance, and break down when you come to be put to the test."

"Never fear; I shall pull through somehow,"

answered James. "I am not so ignorant on such matters as you may suppose. Geary used to say that I did the flunkey business better than any man he ever had at the Tabard: I have always been celebrated for my footmen. Of course I am quite aware that the real article is very different from its stage counterfeit, but I have actually been at some pains to study the genus in its different varieties, and to arrive at some knowledge of the special duties it has to perform. One of our supers had been footman in the family of a well-known marquis, and from him I picked up a good deal of useful information. Then, whenever I have been out to a swell dinner of any kind, I have always kept my eye on the fellows who waited at table. So, what with one thing and what with another, I don't think I shall make any very terrible blunders."

"I hope not, or else Mr. Cleon will give you your *congé*, and that will spoil everything. Further, as regards the mulatto, I have a word or two to say to you. It is quite evident to me that he is the presiding genius at Bon Repos.

If you wish to retain your situation you must pay court to him far more than to M. Platzoff, with whom, indeed, it is doubtful whether you will ever come into personal contact. You must therefore, my dear boy, swallow your pride for the time being, and take care to let the mulatto see that you regard him as a patron to whose kindness you hold yourself deeply indebted."

"All that I can do, and more, to serve my own ends," answered the son. "Your words are words of wisdom, and shall live in my memory."

Mr. Madgin stopped with his son till summoned by the whistle of the last steamer. The two bade each other an affectionate farewell. When next they met it would be as strangers.

Mr. Cleon and the landlord were enjoying the cool of the evening and their cigars outside the house as Mr. Deedes walked up to the Jolly Fishers. He stopped for a moment to speak to them.

"I had a note this morning from my friend Mr. Madgin of Dupley Walls," he said, "in which that gentleman informs me that the young man, James Jasmin, will be with you in the

course of the day after to-morrow at the latest. He hopes that Jasmin will suit you, and he is evidently much pleased that a position has been offered him in an establishment in every way so unexceptionable as that of Bon Repos."

The mulatto's white teeth glistened in the twilight. Evidently he was pleased. He muttered a few words in reply. Mr. Deedes bowed courteously, wished him and the landlord a very good night, and withdrew.

Late in the afternoon of the day but one following that of his visit to Newby-bridge, as Mr. Deedes was busy with a London newspaper three or four days old, the landlord ushered a young man into his room, who, with a bow and a carrying of the forefinger to his forehead, announced himself as James Jasmin from Dupley Walls.

"Don't you go, landlord," said Mr. Deedes; "I may want you." Then he deliberately put on his gold-rimmed glasses, and proceeded to take a leisurely survey of the new comer, who was dressed in a neat (but not new) suit of black, and was standing in a respectful attitude,

and slowly brushing his hat with one sleeve of his coat.

"So you are James Jasmin from Dupley Walls, are you?" asked Mr. Deedes, looking him slowly down from head to feet.

"Yes, sir,—I am the party, sir," answered James.

"Well, Jasmin, and how did you leave my friend Mr. Madgin? and what is the latest news from Dupley Walls?"

"Master and family all pretty well, sir, thank you. Master has got a tenant for the old house, and the family will all start for the continong next week."

"Well, Jasmin, I hope you will contrive to suit your new employer as well as you appear to have suited my friend. Landlord, let him have some dinner, and he had better perhaps wait here till Mr. Cleon comes down this evening."

When Mr. Cleon arrived a couple of hours later Jasmin was duly presented to him. The mulatto scrutinized him keenly and seemed pleased with his appearance, which was decidedly superior to that of the ordinary run of Jeameses.

He finished by asking him for his testimonials.

"I have none with me, sir," answered Jasmin, discreetly emphasizing the *sir*. "I can only refer you to my late master, Mr. Madgin of Dupley Walls, who will gladly speak as to my qualifications and integrity."

"That being the case I will take you for the present on the recommendation of Mr. Deedes, and will write Mr. Madgin in the course of a post or two. You can go up to Bon Repos at once, and I will induct you into your new duties to-morrow."

Jasmin thanked Mr. Cleon respectfully and withdrew. Ten minutes later, with his modest valise in his hand, he set out for his new home. He and Mr. Deedes did not see each other again. Next day Mr. Deedes announced that he was summoned home by important letters. He bade the landlord and Cleon a friendly farewell, and left early on the following morning in time to catch the first train from Windermere going south.

CHAPTER VIII.

MADGIN JUNIOR'S FIRST REPORT.

Mr. Madgin, senior, lost no time after his arrival at home before hastening up to Dupley Walls to see Lady Pollexfen. He had a brief conference with Mirpah while discussing his modest chop and glass of bitter ale; and he found time to read a letter which had arrived for him some days previously from the London diamond merchant whom he had employed to make inquiries as to whether any such gem as the Great Mogul had been offered for sale at any of the great European marts during the past twenty years. The letter was an assurance that no such stone had been in the market, nor was any such known to be in the hands of any private individual.

Mr. Madgin took the letter with him to Dupley Walls. In her grim way Lady Pollexfen seemed

greatly pleased to see him. She was all impatience to hear what news he had to tell her. But Mr. Madgin had his reservations; he did not deem it advisable to detail to her ladyship, step by step, all that he had done. Her sense of honour might revolt at certain things he had found it necessary to do in furtherance of the great object he had in view. He told her of his inquiries among the London diamond merchants, and read to her the letter he had received from one of them. Then he went on to describe Bon Repos and its owner from the glimpses he had had of both. For all such details her ladyship betrayed a curiosity that seemed as if it would never be satisfied. He next went on to inform her that he had succeeded in placing his son as footman at Bon Repos, and that everything now depended on the discoveries James might succeed in making. But nothing was said as to the false pretences and the changed name under which Madgin junior had entered M. Platzoff's household. Those were details which Mr. Madgin kept judiciously to himself. Her ladyship was perfectly satisfied with his report; she

was more than satisfied—she was pleased. She was very sanguine as to the existence of the diamond, and also as to its retention by M. Platzoff; far more so, in fact, than Mr. Madgin himself was. But the latter was too shrewd a man of business to parade his doubts of success before a client who paid so liberally, so long as her hobby was ridden after her own fashion. Mr. Madgin's chief aim in life was to ride other people's hobbies, and be well paid for his jockeyship.

"I am highly gratified, Mr. Madgin," said her ladyship, "by the style, *pleine de finesse*, in which you have so far conducted this delicate investigation. I will not ask you what your next step is to be. You know far better than I can tell you what ought to be done. I leave the matter with confidence in your hands."

"Your ladyship is very kind," observed Mr. Madgin, deferentially. "I will do my best to deserve a continuance of your good opinion."

"As week after week goes by, Mr. Madgin," resumed Lady Pollexfen, "the conviction seems to take deeper root within me that that man—

that villain—M. Platzoff, has my son's diamond still in his possession. I have a sort of spiritual consciousness that such is the case. My waking intuitions, my dreams by night, all point to the same end. You, with your cold worldly sense, may laugh at such things; we women, with our finer organization, know how often the truth comes to us on mystic wings. The diamond will yet be mine!"

"What nonsense women sometimes talk," said Mr. Madgin contemptuously to himself, as he walked back through the park. "Who would believe that my lady, so sensible on most things, could talk such utter rubbish. But women have a way of leaping to results, and ignoring processes, that is simply astounding to men of common sense. The diamond hers, indeed! Although I have been so successful so far, there is as much difference between what I have done and what has yet to be done as there is between the simple alphabet and a mathematical theorem. To-morrow's post ought to bring me a letter from Bon Repos."

The morrow's post did bring Mr. Madgin a

letter from Bon Repos. The writer of it was not his son, but Cleon. It was addressed, as a matter of course, to Dupley Walls, of which place the mulatto had been led to believe Mr. Madgin was the proprietor. The note, which was couched in tolerable English, was simply a request to be furnished with a testimonial as to the character and abilities of James Jasmin, late footman at Dupley Walls. Mr. Madgin replied by return of post as under:—

"Dupley Walls,
"July 27th.

"Sir,—In reply to your favour of the 25th inst., inquiring as to the character and respectability of James Jasmin, late a footman in my employ, I beg to say that I can strongly recommend him, and have much pleasure in so doing, for any similar employment under you. Jasmin was with me for several years; during the whole time I found him to be trustworthy, sober, and intelligent in an eminent degree. Had I not been reducing my establishment previous to a lengthened residence in the south of Europe, I should certainly have retained Jasmin in the

position which he has occupied for so long a time with credit to himself and with satisfaction to me.

"I have the honour, Sir, to remain,

"Your obedient servant,

"SOLOMON MADGIN.

"— CLEON, ESQ.,
Bon Repos,
Windermere."

After writing and despatching the above epistle, over the composition of which he chuckled to himself several times, Mr. Madgin was obliged to wait, with what contentment was possible to him, the receipt of a communication from his son. But one day passed after another without bringing any news from Bon Repos, till Mr. Madgin grew fearful that some disaster had befallen both James and his scheme. At length he made up his mind to wait two days longer, and should no letter come within that time, to start at once for Windermere. Fortunately his anxiety was relieved and the journey rendered unnecessary by the receipt, next day, of a long letter from his son. It was Mirpah who took

it from the postman's hand, and Mirpah took it to her father in high glee. She knew the writing and deciphered the post-mark. For once in his life Mr. Madgin was too agitated to read. He put his hand to his side, and motioned Mirpah to open the letter.

"Read it," he said in a husky voice, as she was about to hand it to him. So Mirpah sat down near her father and read what follows:—

"Bon Repos,
July, some date, but I'll be
hanged if I know what.

"My dear Dad,—In some rustic nook reclining, Silken tresses softly twining, Far-off bells so faintly ringing, While we list the blackbird singing, Merrily his roundelay. There! I composed those lines this morning during the process of shaving. I don't think they are very bad. I put them at the beginning of my letter so as to make sure that you will read them, a process of which I might reasonably be doubtful had I left them for the fag end of my communication. Learn, sir, that you have a son who is a born poet!!!

"But now to business.

"Don't hurry over my letter, dear dad; don't run away with the idea that I have any grand discovery to lay before you. My epistle will be merely a record of trifles and commonplaces, and that simply from the fact that I have nothing better to write about. To me, at least, they seem nothing but trifles. For you they may possess an occult significance of which I know nothing.

"In the first place. On the day following that of your departure from Windermere, I was duly inducted by Cleon into my new duties. They are few in number, and by no means difficult. So far I have contrived to get through them without any desperate blunder. Another thing I have done of which you will be pleased to hear: I have contrived to ingratiate myself with the mulatto, and am in high favour with him. You were right in your remarks; he is worth cultivation, in so far that he is all-powerful in our little establishment. M. Platzoff never interferes in the management of Bon Repos. Everything is left to Cleon; and whatever the

mulatto may be in other respects, so far as I can judge he is quite worthy of the trust reposed in him. I believe him to be thoroughly attached to his master.

"Of M. Platzöff I have very little to tell you. Even in his own house and among his own people he is a recluse. He has his own special rooms, and three-fourths of his time is spent in them. Above all things he dislikes to see strange faces about him, and I have been instructed by Cleon to keep out of his way as much as possible. Even the old servants, people who have been under his roof for years, let themselves be seen by him as seldom as need be. In person he is a little withered-up yellow-skinned man, as dry as a last year's pippin, but very keen, bright, and vivacious. He speaks such excellent English that he must have lived in this country for many years. One thing I have discovered about him, that he is a great smoker. He has a room set specially apart for the practice of the sacred rite to which he retires every day as soon as dinner is over, and from which he seldom emerges again till it is time to retire

for the night. Cleon alone is privileged to enter this room. I have never yet been inside it. Equally forbidden ground is M. Platzoff's bedroom, and a small study beyond, all *en suite*.

"Those who keep servants keep spies under their roof. It has been part of my purpose to make myself agreeable to the older domestics at Bon Repos, and from them I have picked up several little facts which all Mr. Cleon's shrewdness has not been able entirely to conceal. In this way I have learned that M. Platzoff is a confirmed opium-smoker. That once, or sometimes twice, a week he shuts himself up in his room and smokes himself into a sort of trance, in which he remains unconscious for hours. That at such times Cleon has to look after him as though he were a child; and that it depends entirely on the mulatto as to whether he ever emerges from his state of coma, or stops in it till he dies. The accuracy of this latter statement, however, I must beg leave to doubt.

"Further gossip has informed me, whether truly or falsely I am not in a position to judge, that M. Platzoff is a refugee from his own country.

That were he to set foot on the soil of Russia, a life-long banishment to Siberia would be the mildest fate that he could expect; and that neither in France nor in Austria would he be safe from arrest. The people who come as guests to Bon Repos are, so I am informed, in nearly every instance foreigners, and, as a natural consequence, they are all set down by the servants' gossip as red-hot republicans, thirsting for the blood of kings and aristocrats, and willing to put a firebrand under every throne in Europe. In fact, there cannot be a popular outbreak against bad government in any part of Europe without M. Platzoff and his friends being credited with having at least a finger in the pie.

"All these statements and suppositions you will of course accept *cum grano salis*. They may have their value as serving to give you a rude and exaggerated idea as to what manner of man is the owner of Bon Repos; and it is quite possible that some elements of truth may be hidden in them. To me, M. Platzoff seems nothing more than a mild old gentleman; a little eccentric, it may be, as differing from our English notions

in many things. Not a smiling fiend in patent boots and white cravat, whose secret soul is bent on murder and rapine; but a shy valetudinarian, whose only firebrand is a harmless fusee wherewith to light a pipe of fragrant Cavendish.

"One permanent guest we have at Bon Repos —a guest who was here before my arrival, and of whose departure no signs are yet visible. That is why I call him permanent. His name is Ducie, and he is an ex-captain in the English army. He is a tall, handsome man of four or five-and-forty, and is a thorough gentleman both in manners and appearance. I like him much, and he has taken quite a fancy to me. One thing I can see quite plainly: that he and Cleon are quietly at daggers drawn. Why they should be so I cannot tell, unless it is that Cleon is jealous of Captain Ducie's influence over Platzoff, although the difference in social position of the two men ought to preclude any feeling of that kind. Captain Ducie might be M. Platzoff's very good friend without infringing in the slightest degree on the privileges of Cleon as his master's favourite servant. On one point I am certain:

that the mulatto suspects Ducie of some purpose or covert scheme in making so long a stay at Bon Repos. He has asked me to act as a sort of spy on the captain's movements; to watch his comings and goings, his hours of getting up and going to bed, and to report to him, Cleon, anything that I may see in the slightest degree out of the common way.

"It was not without a certain inward qualm that I accepted the position thrust upon me by Cleon. In accepting it I flatter myself that I took a common-sense view of the case. In the *petite* drama of real life in which I am now acting an uneventful part, I look upon myself as a 'general utility' man, bound to enact any and every character which my manager may think proper to entrust into my hands. Now, you are my manager, and if it seem to me conducive to your interests (you being absent) that, in addition to my present character, I should be 'cast' for that of spy or amateur detective, I see no good reason why I should refuse it. So far, however, all my Fouché-like devices have resulted in nothing. The captain's comings and goings—

in fact, all his movements—are of a most commonplace and uninteresting kind. But I have this advantage, that the character I have undertaken enables me to assume, with Cleon's consent, certain privileges such as, under other circumstances, would never have been granted me. Further, should I succeed in discovering anything of importance, it by no means follows that I should consider myself bound to reveal the same to Cleon. It might be greatly more to my interest to retain any such facts for my own use. Meanwhile, I wait and watch.

"Thus you will perceive, my dear dad, that an element of interest—a dramatic element—is being slowly evolved out of the commonplace duties of my present position. This nucleus of interest may grow and develope into something startling; or it may die slowly out and expire for lack of material to feed itself upon. In any case, dear dad, you may expect a frequent feuilleton from

"Your affectionate son,

"J. M., otherwise

"James Jasmin.

"P.S.—I should not like to be a real flunkey all my life. Such a position is not without its advantages to men of a lazy turn, but it is terribly soul-subduing. Not a sign yet of the G. M. D."

"There is nothing much in all this to tell her ladyship," said Mr. Madgin, as he took off his spectacles and refolded the letter. "Still, I do not think it by any means a discouraging report. If James's patience only equal his shrewdness and audacity, and if there be really anything to worm out, he will be sure to make himself master of it in the course of time. Ah! if he had only my patience, now—the patience of an old man who has won half his battles by playing a waiting game."

"Is it not possible that Lady Pollexfen may want you to read the letter?"

"It is quite possible. But James's irreverent style is hardly suited in parts for her ladyship's ears. You, dear child, must make an improved copy of the letter. Your own good taste will tell you which sentences require to be altered or

expunged. Here and there you may work in a neat compliment to your father; as coming direct from James her ladyship will not deem it out of place—it will not sound fulsome in her ears, and will serve to remind her of what she too often forgets—that in Solomon Madgin she has a faithful steward, who ought to be better rewarded than he is. Write out the copy at once, my child, and I will take it up to Dupley Walls the first thing to-morrow morning."

CHAPTER IX.

LOST AS SOON AS FOUND.

JANET'S life at this time was a very quiet one; but the long years she had spent in France had been so tame and colourless, so wanting in home pleasures and endearments, that, by contrast, her days at Dupley Walls were full of variety and of that sweet charm which springs from a knowledge that you are at once appreciated and loved.

Janet's love for Captain George was as yet a timid callow fledgling that could do nothing but flutter in the nest where it was born. Very pretty to look at, but not to be looked at too often, for fear lest its hiding-place should be found out and some rude hand should take it unawares. Her love for Sister Agnes was of a different texture, and made up the real quiet happiness of her life. She felt like a plant that

has been lifted out of the cold corner in which it has found the elements of a stunted growth and set to bask in a flood of gracious sunshine. In such cases the result is not difficult to foretell. The plant grows more and more beautiful under the sweet influence that has been brought to bear upon it, and repays the sunshine with its most fragrant blossoms. In such like was Janet's young life nourished and enriched by the love that existed between her and Sister Agnes. Her inner life developed itself unconsciously; her heart grew in wisdom, and all the finer qualities of her nature began to unfold themselves one by one as delicate leaves unfold themselves in the sun.

Janet was kept very closely to her duties by Lady Pollexfen. Still, each day brought its little interregnums—odd hours, or even half-hours, when she was not wanted by her task-mistress — when her ladyship was sleeping, or lunching, or discussing private matters with Mr. Madgin, or what not. By far the greater part of these stolen moments were spent with Sister Agnes. More would have been so spent had

not the invalid given strict injunctions that a certain portion of each day should be set apart by Janet for out-door exercise. Sister Agnes was far too weak to accompany her. As the summer days went on she gathered not strength but weakness, and more and more clearly she began to discern the end that was coming so surely upon her. But as yet this was a solemn secret known only to herself and to her doctor. By no one else within Dupley Walls was it even suspected. Outwardly there was no change in her from day to day, or one so slight that those who were in the habit of seeing her every few hours never perceived it.

Her window had a pleasant outlook across the park. Her couch was wheeled close up to it, and there she lay from early in the forenoon till late in the afternoon, a pale spiritual-eyed lady, slowly dying, although neither by word nor look was there any betrayal of that fact to those about her. Janet, we may be sure, had no suspicion of it. Never a morning came but her first inquiry was as to whether Sister Agnes felt any better.

"A little better this morning, I think, dear," Sister Agnes would smilingly say. "Or if not stronger, at least no weaker than I was yesterday." And for the time being she would feel that her statement was true. Later on in the day some small portion of vitality would seem to fade out of her which the freshness and strength of the following morning could not wholly replace. But Janet hoped with the hopefulness of youth that when the hot languorous days of summer should give place to the chastened heats of autumn health and strength would come back to Sister Agnes; hoped it devoutly, although she knew that should such be the case she herself would no longer be needed by Lady Pollexfen, but that she should have to go out into the world and fight for her daily bread with such small skill as there might be in her. Meanwhile she waited on Sister Agnes, and ministered to her simple needs as much as lay in her power to do so. To gather a fresh bouquet every morning for the room of her she loved so dearly was one of Janet's pleasantest occupations. Then there was always some new and interesting

book to read aloud, with frequent interludes of music and conversation. Now and then an odd hour or two would be devoted to the science of the needle. Happy days !—days such as Janet, if she were to live to be a hundred years old, could never forget.

Now that she had become more accustomed to Lady Pollexfen and her peculiar ways, the duties of her position ceased to press so heavily upon Janet. She found, to her surprise, that Lady Pollexfen's often positively cruel speeches no longer wounded her feelings so deeply as they did at first. The dislike and fear with which she had formerly regarded the strange old woman began to give place to a gentler feeling—to one of profound pity, and in this very pity she found an armour of proof against all the slights and contumely with which she was treated. One thing must be said in favour of Lady Pollexfen. However capricious she might be in her own treatment of Janet, the servants were given to understand that in all things Miss Holme was to be regarded as a young gentlewoman, and not as one of themselves. Sometimes her ladyship

would be overcome by a fit of graciousness, which, however, never lasted more than a day or two at a time; but while it did last Janet felt that her life was a very pleasant one. Such occasions were exceptional. Lady Pollexfen's normal mood was one of mingled harshness and suspicion, just rubbed over with a sort of cynical *laissez faire*-ism that to a girl of Janet's disposition was peculiarly distasteful. Janet never answered her taunts and bitter speeches, but now and then a flash of scorn from her beautiful eyes, or a sudden rush of colour to her cheek, showed that the barbed words had struck home. Janet's icy meekness had often the effect of irritating her ladyship far more than any angry retort would have done. At the latter she would merely have laughed, but Janet's demeanour seemed suggestive of a fine though hidden contempt, and betrayed an indifference to her taunts that robbed her of half her pleasure in the utterance of them. As a consequence, there being no real faults to lay hold of, she sometimes accused Janet of those faults from which she was most free.

"Who and what are you, Miss Holme," she

one day asked, in her scornful way, "that you should give yourself the airs of a *grande dame* when in my presence? Judging from your demeanour, you and not I might be the mistress of Dupley Walls. Pride ill becomes a dependent like you—a mere nobody—a person who has eaten the bread of charity from the day of her birth. If you had even the excuse of good looks! But that is quite out of the question. If you are in any way remarkable, it is for an incurable *gaucherie*, and for a stolidity of intellect that would not discredit a ploughboy."

It was only the teaching and example of Sister Agnes that kept Janet on such occasions from breaking into open rebellion, and bidding farewell for ever to Dupley Walls. But the gentle counsels of the sick woman prevailed, and by degrees these bitter speeches lost much of their sting.

Sometimes, when her mood was more than ordinarily spiteful, her ladyship would touch Janet's feelings in a different way. It was part of Janet's duties to assist Lady Pollexfen with the use of her arm as the latter walked from

room to room, or on the terrace outside. As the two were walking staidly along, the old lady would sometimes pinch Janet's arm viciously between her thumb and finger. The first time this happened, Janet started and gave utterance to a little shriek.

"What is the matter, child?" said her ladyship, stopping suddenly in her walk. "Have you seen a mouse, or what has frightened you? Pray try to keep your nerves under better control."

After that first time, Janet bore the infliction in stoical silence, but her arm was seldom without two or three blue and black finger marks as evidences of the petty torture she had undergone. To Sister Agnes she made no mention of this fresh mode of annoyance. The knowledge of it would only have jarred the sick woman's feelings still more, and would not have spared Janet the infliction.

Once every forenoon, between the hours of ten and twelve, Lady Pollexfen marched in her slow and stately fashion, and leaning on Janet's arm, from her own rooms on one side of the

house to those of Sister Agnes on the opposite side, there to make formal inquiry as to the state of the latter's health. She never stayed longer than three or four minutes at each visit, and she never sat down. She seemed to regard these daily visits as a matter of duty, and as such she conscientiously included them in each day's programme of things to be done; but she spent no more time over them than was absolutely necessary. Sometimes Janet, on returning alone to the sick woman's room, soon after one of these visits, would find Sister Agnes in tears. Those were the only occasions on which her habitual serenity seemed to be seriously disturbed. But at sight of Janet's loving face her tears soon ceased to flow.

About this time Father Spiridion began to be seen more frequently at Dupley Walls. His visits were to Sister Agnes. Janet had contracted quite a liking for the kindly old man. He was a strange mixture of shrewdness and benignity, of prejudice and out-of-the-way knowledge. He never met Janet without a smile and a few words of pleasant greeting. She was too

old now to have sweetmeats given her, so he gave her his blessing instead. Now, as of old, one of her greatest treats was to hear him play the grand old organ in the gallery.

Slowly and almost imperceptibly Sister Agnes faded from day to day, and those most about her suspected nothing. But at daybreak one morning there was a ringing of bells, and Dr. Graile was sent for in hot haste, and by-and-by it was reported through the house that Sister Agnes had become suddenly worse, and that her life was in danger. Janet was like one distracted. She was forbidden the room, and three whole days and nights passed away before she saw again the face of her she so dearly loved. She besieged the doctor and the nurse with questions, but from neither of those functionaries could anything beyond a grave shake of the head be elicited. How she got through her routine of duties with Lady Pollexfen she could never afterwards remember. Happily during those few days her ladyship was less exacting than common—more silent and subdued, and given to long fits of absorbing self-communion.

On the fourth morning a message came to Janet that she was wanted in Sister Agnes's room. She went tremblingly. As she put her hand on the door it was opened from the inside, and Lady Pollexfen came out. Janet had never seen such an expression on her face before. It was set and colourless, and full of a deep frowning trouble. The trouble sprang from her heart: the frown was a visible sign of her intense will —of her unsparing determination to trample that trouble under foot and put it away from her for ever. Her eyes were fixed straight before her, but seemed to see nothing. Her tall thin figure looked as upright and rigid as if cast in bronze. She swept slowly past Janet without appearing to have seen her.

Janet passed forward into the little sitting-room. She saw with an aching heart that this morning the sofa was without its occupant. After a word of warning from the nurse, she was allowed to enter the bedroom: then the door was closed behind her, and she and Sister Agnes were left alone.

Janet could not repress the low cry that

sprang to her lips at the first glimpse of the changed face before her. On it there now rested the unmistakeable seal of death. Janet flung herself on her knees by the side of the bed in an agony of grief, and pressed to her lips the worn white hand that was extended to greet her.

"My poor darling—my poor Janet!" was all that Sister Agnes could murmur. There were no tears in her eyes, but on her lips a smile of heavenly contentment.

Mindful of the caution that had been given her, Janet, after a few minutes, contrived to subdue in some measure the outward signs of the grief that was rending her heart.

"Come nearer," whispered Sister Agnes; "let me clasp you in my arms; let me feel for a little while that you are all my own. I have something to tell you, and not much time to tell it in. Kiss me, darling, and then listen to what I have to say without interrupting me."

When Janet had nestled to the side of the sick woman, and they had kissed each other fondly, Sister Agnes spoke again. Her words

were low but clear; every syllable fell distinctly on her listener's ears. Occasionally she had to pause for breath, but Janet never spoke a word till she had done.

"It is a strange confession, dear Janet, that I am about to make," she began. "What I have now to tell you I bound myself by a solemn oath many years ago never to reveal till my dying day. That day has come at last. A few short hours will now end all. I have taken counsel with Father Spiridion, from whom I have no secrets. He has given me leave to speak. To-day is my last day on earth, and my oath is no longer binding. I could not have died happy had I carried my secret with me to the grave. But before I go any further, you must give me your sacred word never to reveal to Lady Pollexfen, nor indeed to any one else, what I am about to tell you, without having first obtained the sanction of Father Spiridion and Major Strickland to your taking such a step. Later on you will understand fully my reasons for asking for such a promise."

Sister Agnes paused, as if waiting for a reply.

But Janet could not speak. A long, lingering pressure of the arms was her only answer. But it was an answer that satisfied the dying woman. She pressed her lips fondly to the tear-stained face that was nestling on her shoulder, and then went on with her narration.

"Dearest, the time has now come for me to lift from off your life the weight of that mystery which has lain upon it ever since you were little more than a lisping child,—since you first began to feel, think, and understand, and to wonder why you were unlike other children in having no mother nor home of your own. The secret of your birth shall be to you a secret no longer. All these years, darling, you have not been without a mother's love, though you yourself might know it not. Janet, my darling! my daughter! it is your mother whose arms are round you now. Hush, sweet one! do not speak. My little strength will hardly serve to carry me to the end. Yes, dear one, I am your mother, and Lady Pollexfen is your grandmother; I am her ladyship's youngest and only living child. Why all these things have been kept from you for so

long a time, why you have lived unacknowledged under the roof that should have held you as its greatest treasure, will be duly revealed to you after my death. Attached to this silver chain is a tiny key that will open a box which will be given to you by Father Spiridion. Inside that box you will find a paper written by me, which will tell you everything relating to your birth and history that it is needful for you to know. The good father and Major Strickland will be your counsellors; put yourself and your cause implicitly into their hands, and leave the rest to a Higher Power. Sweet one, I have now told you all that it is needful for you to know while I am still with you—all that my strength will allow me to say. We can be together but a brief while longer; let us during that time forget everything save that we are mother and child."

"Oh, mamma, mamma!" sobbed Janet, "are we brought together after all these years only to part again in so short a time?"

"Even so, dearest. And why should we grieve that such is the case? Our parting is

only for a time. No conviction was ever more deeply impressed upon me than that is. As I stand now, earthly troubles and sorrows have no power to touch me. Even the knowledge that I am about to separate from my Janet cannot quench the solemn joy that fills my soul. I am so close to eternity that a few years seem to me but as one day. And when that brief, troubled day shall be at an end, I pray that my daughter and I may meet again in that heavenly rest into which all those shall enter who have guided their footsteps aright."

But Janet could not be consoled.

Later on in the day Sister Agnes sent for her again, and mother and daughter spent more than an hour together in sacred communion. In the dusk of evening Lady Pollexfen went again to her sick daughter's room. What passed at that last interview was known to themselves alone. Lady Pollexfen never again saw her daughter alive. Then Father Spiridion administered the last offices of his church to the dying woman. About nine o'clock the doctor drove up in his gig. But the time when he could be

of service was gone by. At last mother and daughter were left alone together, and alone they remained all through the dark hours. At daybreak Father Spiridion glided into the room. The fast-sinking woman opened her eyes and smiled.

"Play the *Jubilate* for me," she whispered, "and open wide the casement."

The deep voice of the organ, exultant, yearning, solemn, thrilled through the room; and on its wings, through the faint grey of the autumn morning, the soul of Sister Agnes was borne away.

"Forget not that we shall meet again," were her last words.

CHAPTER X.

THE CONFESSION.

Miss Holme, Father Spiridion, and Major Strickland were seated together in the little parlour of the latter on a certain morning a few weeks after the death of Sister Agnes. The major had been over to Dupley Walls to beg a holiday for Janet, and had brought her back with him. This was the day appointed for the opening of the box that had been left in the father's charge.

Janet in her black dress looked pale and worn, but very lovely. She had been obliged in some measure to conceal the outward tokens of her grief for fear of exciting the suspicions of Lady Pollexfen, and the effort had lent a touch of sternness to her face such as it had never worn before. The wound in her heart was as deep as ever it had been, but she had learned

already to control her emotions, and her demeanour this morning was marked by a gravity and self-restraint that made her seem older than her years.

When they were all seated at table Father Spiridion produced the box, a very small affair, made of cedar and hooped with silver. Janet handed him the key and he proceeded to open it.

"Before making an examination of the contents," he said, turning to Janet, "it is requisite that I should enlighten you on one or two points. At the request of Sister Agnes I have informed our friend, Major Strickland, of the relationship that existed between you and her; I have told him also that you are the granddaughter of Lady Pollexfen—two facts with which he was previously unacquainted and which are a source of great surprise to him. I have further informed him as to the particular request of Sister Agnes that he should act with me in this case as trustee or executor for the furtherance of your interests in whatsoever direction those interests may seem to lie. Of the contents of this box I

have only a general knowledge. I believe the chief article in it will be found to be a statement, written out by Sister Agnes, in which will be given such details of her early life as she has deemed needful for the complete elucidation of the facts that she was desirous of submitting for our consideration. Of those details I myself have no knowledge, but with her relations towards you and Lady Pollexfen I was made acquainted several years ago under the seal of confession. With your permission we will now proceed to an examination of the contents of the box."

Father Spiridion opened the box slowly and reverently as though he could not forget that it had been last closed by the fingers of the dead. Of the contending emotions by which Janet was agitated it would be vain to attempt any analysis. She sat with one hand clasped rigidly in the other, her large luminous eyes fixed steadfastly on Father Spiridion, her bosom rising and falling rather faster than common, but looking in other respects as cold and statuesque as though she had been cut out of some beautiful stone.

The first article produced by Father Spiridion from the box was a miniature painted on ivory of an exceedingly handsome young man, with initials in filigree silver at the back. The next article was a large old-fashioned gold locket containing hair of two different colours worked into the form of a true-lover's knot. Then came a worn wedding-ring. Then a marriage-certificate the writing of which was faded and yellow with age. Next two or three love-letters signed with the same initials, E.F., as were on the back of the miniature. Last of all came several sheets of paper stitched together, and folded across, and endorsed:

"A Confession.
To be read by my daughter, Janet Holme;
by my old and faithful friend, Major Strickland;
and by my father-confessor, Father Spiridion;
by them and by no one else."

Each article as it was produced from the box was, after a cursory examination, handed over to Janet. She gazed at the portrait and the locket with no other sign of outward emotion than a

closer knitting of her brows. The wedding-ring she kissed passionately. The certificate she read carefully twice over, and her face flushed as she read. Then she refolded it and put it calmly down in its place on the table. The love-letters were merely glanced at, and were then left for future consideration. The Confession itself Janet took into her hands for a moment. She recognised the writing at once. With a deep sigh she gave it back to the priest.

"Read it aloud, dear Father Spiridion, if you please," she said.

The old man rubbed his spectacles slowly and solemnly, as befitted the occasion, placed them carefully astride his nose, and after a preliminary cough, took up the paper and read what follows :—

"My darling Janet,—It is not intended that these lines shall meet your eye till the hand that writes them is mingled with the dust from which it came. I have been driven to write what is here set down by some inward influence—by

some occult power working through me, and giving me no rest till I promised myself that it should be done. For myself, I have done with the world and its active duties long ago. I have no longer any interest in it except in so far as I may be permitted to watch over your fortunes, to love you with the secret love of a mother who dare not acknowledge her child, and to perform such small works of charity among the sick and poor as my humble means may allow of. But as regards you, the case is altogether different. You are on the verge of womanhood, and life, with all its struggles and temptations, is still before you. To lift up and clear away the mystery that has enveloped your childhood and youth, to inform you what your real position is in that great world into which you are about to enter, is therefore an act of the simplest justice, and one which ought no longer to be delayed. Unfortunately the revelation is one which I am forbidden to make while I am alive, but I am advised that in the form of a written confession it may be received by you after my death. These remarks will be better understood by you

when you shall have read the whole of what I am now about to set down.

"I was born at Dupley Walls, the youngest of three children. My brother Charles, who died in India at the age of twenty, was two years older, and my sister Eudoxia, who died when she was fourteen, was six years older than me. When I was three years old I was sent for by my father's half-sister, a rich maiden lady who lived at Beckley in Cumberland. It was understood that I was to be regarded as her adopted child, and that some day the great bulk of her fortune would come to me. Of my father I remember next to nothing. I never saw him again after going to live at Beckley. I have been told, and I have reason to believe it true, that he disliked me, and was glad to be rid of me for ever. In this respect my sister fared worse than I did. My father disliked her almost as much as he disliked me, but poor Eudoxia had no rich aunt to release her from a tyranny that was driving her slowly into the grave.

"My father, Sir John Pollexfen, was a man of strong passions; cruel and unbending to a degree

where he could be so with impunity. He and my mother were ill-matched. Knowing as you do, what Lady Pollexfen is now, how proud, stern, and unyielding, with yet occasional capricious fits of kindness and generous feeling, you will readily understand how her married life was one of perpetual discord and soul-fretting unhappiness. At length she and my father separated in consequence of a disagreement respecting my brother, and they never saw each other again till my father lay dying. He carried his dislike of my mother beyond the grave, in ordering that his body should be kept unburied for twenty years; that it should remain under whatever roof my mother might choose to make her permanent residence during that time; and that my mother should visit it in person at least once a week during the whole period of twenty years, should her life be spared for so long a time.

"In the seclusion of Beckley the items of news that reached us from Dupley Walls were few and far between. I had never been encouraged to write to either of my parents, and neither of them ever thought of writing to me. A

coldly-worded letter once every six months from my aunt to her brother, and an equally cold reply a month or two afterwards, were the sole links that bound me to those I would fain have loved but could not. At the age of seventeen I knew or remembered little more of my parents than I should have done had they died on the day I left Dupley Walls. Had they really been dead I should have cherished their memory, and thought tenderly of them; but since they were alive, their cold neglect chilled me to the heart, and withered every flower of love that ought to have flourished there.

"But I was not unhappy. Although my life at Beckley was one of almost conventual seclusion, and although my aunt was a woman of unsympathetic nature and ascetic disposition, the springs of youth were fresh within me, and who could tell what happiness the future might not have in store? The situation of the house was a very lonely one, and there being so little that was attractive to me within doors, it cannot be wondered at that nearly the whole of my spare time was spent among the glorious

moors and fells by which we were shut in on every side. My aunt never made any objection to my long solitary rambles: solitude was congenial to herself, she loved best to be alone, and to her it seemed only natural and proper that my disposition in such things should bear some resemblance to her own.

"It was on the occasion of one of these lonely rambles that I first encountered Mr. Fairfax. He had been out fishing, and was crossing the moor a little way behind me on his road to the nearest village, when a sudden thunderstorm came on. In three minutes I should have been drenched to the skin. Mr. Fairfax saw the emergency, hurried up, apologized, introduced himself, and insisted on my acceptance of his waterproof till the rain should have ceased. I loved him from that first time of seeing him. We met again and again. If a man's oaths may ever be trusted, he loved me in return. I listened and believed. He asked me to elope with him, and I told him that if he would make me his wife I would follow him to the end of the world. He said: 'It will be my dearest happiness to make you

my wife, only you must give me your solemn promise never to reveal your marriage without having first obtained my permission to do so. Family reasons compel me to ask this sacrifice.' To make such a promise implied no sacrifice on my part; it was not his family but him that I was about to marry, and to my mind there was something very delicious in the thought of being a participant in so important a secret.

"But why go into details?—although I could linger over this part of my story for years. It is sufficient to say that we eloped, and that we were married the same day at Whitehaven, a few miles away. A friend of Mr. Fairfax, named Captain Lant, gave me away. The only other witness to our marriage was the old pew-opener. Immediately after the marriage we bade farewell to Captain Lant, and went northward into Scotland. After a happy month spent in the Highlands we came south. I would fain have stopped to see the wonders of London, of which I had heard so much at different times, but Mr. Fairfax would only agree to pass one night there, after which we at once set out for the

Continent. Avoiding Paris and all the large towns, but lingering here and there in some sweet country nook, we came at length to the borders of the Lake of Lucerne. Half a mile inland, but overlooking the lake, and out of the ordinary track of tourists, we found a tiny villa that was in want of a tenant. Mr. Fairfax took it for a term of six months, and there we settled down.

"Before leaving Scotland my husband had allowed me to write to my father and also to my aunt, informing them of my marriage, but mentioning neither my husband's name nor the place where we were then living. If any answers were sent, they were to be addressed to me under my maiden name at one of the London district post-offices. When we reached town my husband sent to the office in question. There was only one letter for me. It was from my father, and contained, as enclosures, my letters to himself and to my aunt. His reply was a cruel one. In it he told me that he had disowned me for ever. That to him and to my mother I was as though I had never lived; or rather, as though I had

died on my wedding morn. That they had put on mourning for me, and looked upon me in all respects as one dead. Finally, he forbade me ever to communicate with him again either by letter or in any other way.

"This letter cut me to the quick. In what way it affected my husband I was unable to judge. He read it through in silence, and then tossed it contemptuously on one side; nor did he ever allude to it in any way again.

"I had been so accustomed from childhood upward to exist on such a very small modicum of love that the sting implanted by my father's letter would have made no enduring wound had the great compensation of a husband's enduring love been granted me in place of that which I had lost. It is true that I was married, and that I had a husband who loved me; but his love was not of that kind on which my heart could rest as on a rock against which all the storms of life would beat in vain. Mr. Fairfax, when he married me, meant that his love should be of the strong and enduring kind; but by what magic at our command shall we change freestone into

granite, or chalk into marble? How could I blame Mr. Fairfax for the non-possession of a quality which Nature had utterly denied him? Constancy was a virtue that he might dimly comprehend, but which he altogether failed to reduce into the practice of his daily life.

"The pretty castle I had built on my wedding-day proved to be of the veriest mushroom growth. The enchanted prince who was to have dwelt happily in it his whole life long, refused to be confined within such narrow limits, and razed its golden walls to the ground with a sneer.

"However much I might repine in secret for the loss of that which could never be mine again, I made no complaint in words. I bore all in proud silence: my husband never heard a single murmur from my lips. The decay of his love was not a matter of a day or a week. It was slow, gradual, sure. I sometimes found myself morbidly trying to calculate how long a time would elapse before its last grains would vanish as the million that had gone before had vanished, leaving nothing but cold indifference behind. There was some slight touch of

comfort in after days in knowing that those few last grains were still mine on that morning when I saw him for the last time.

"We had lived nearly twelve months on the banks of Lucerne. During that time my husband had made two journeys to London, on both occasions going alone, and on both occasions being away from me exactly fourteen days. He never said a word to me as to the nature of the business which called him away, and I was too proud to ask him. Although his wife, I knew absolutely nothing respecting his antecedents, his actual position in society, or what relatives he had and who they were. I had married him without asking to be enlightened on such matters, and he took care afterwards that my ignorance should remain undisturbed. I knew that there was some mystery in the case. He had told me as much as that when asking me to swear not to reveal the fact of our marriage to any one without his express sanction. More than that I did not seek to know. What did it matter to me who or what this man's relations were, when the love with which he had bound me to himself was

slowly breaking link by link? But what I did secretly resent was the fact that all letters addressed to him were fetched by himself personally from the nearest post-office; and that all letters written by him were written furtively, as it were, so that not a line of their contents should be seen by me, and were likewise posted by himself so that no second pair of eyes should see how they were addressed.

"At length there came a day when Mr. Fairfax received a letter which seemed to trouble him more than any he had ever received before during the brief time I had been his wife. I had no means of judging by whom it was written. He read it over at least twenty times, and each time its perusal seemed to leave him more puzzled than he had been before. Then he put it away, and I did not see it again. But during the two days that followed before he answered it there was something in his manner which told me how deeply that letter was centred in his thoughts. Two or three days still later he announced to me that he was going on a sketching expedition, and that he might be

away for a couple of weeks. It was not the first time he had made a similar excuse for leaving me, but he had never before been away for so long a time. Whenever Mr. Fairfax was absent, a certain Signora Trachini, the widow of a poor Italian gentleman, came and kept me company at the villa till his return. This time also she came with her needles, and her immense balls of cotton, and her well-thumbed breviary. Then my husband, having packed up all things requisite for his expedition, bade me a more than ordinarily affectionate farewell, and left me. I watched him down the winding road that leads to the lake, a peasant trudging behind with his luggage. At the corner where the large orange tree grows, he turned and waved his hand. And that was the last that I ever saw of Edmund Fairfax."

CHAPTER XI.

THE CONFESSION CONTINUED.

"My husband had been about three days gone when bad weather set in. For several hours the lake was lashed by a wild storm of wind and rain. Then the rain ceased, and fitful gleams of sunshine lighted up the landscape, but the wind still blew in fierce troubled gusts, and so continued for several days. On the sixth day after my husband's departure I was surprised by a visit from Captain Lant, whom I had not seen since my wedding-day. He was very grave, but there was nothing in his looks from which I could augur that he was the bearer of ill news. He was not a man whom I could ever have liked, but I bade him welcome for my husband's sake. His first words told me that I had lost that husband for ever. Mr. Fairfax had been drowned during the storm three days before,

while out sketching in a small boat on the Lake of Zurich. His body had been recovered; had been recognised by Captain Lant, in whose company my husband was making the excursion, but who had not been on the lake; and had been buried the following morning in the churchyard nearest the scene of the accident. In corroboration of his story, Captain Lant brought me my husband's vest, his purse, his ring, his watch, his pencil-case, and a small pocket-book, the whole of which articles had the appearance of having been in the water for several hours. I could not doubt the truth of his tale.

"Captain Lant stayed with me, and did all that could be done to facilitate my arrangements for leaving the villa and returning to England. Among the luggage which my husband had not taken with him, was found a pocket-book containing bank-notes to the value of two hundred pounds. The notes were sealed up in an envelope that was endorsed with my name, and had these words written below: 'In case of any accident happening to myself.' This proof of my husband's affectionate forethought touched

me to the quick. He might have had a presentiment of the terrible ending that was so soon to befall him.

"Before Captain Lant and I parted we had a long conversation together. I told him that I knew nothing whatever of my late husband's social position, nor whether he had a single relative in the world. On these two points I was desirous that Captain Lant should afford me some information, but he professed to be as ignorant in the matter as I was. Although Mr. Fairfax and he had been very good friends, their friendship was only a thing of three years' growth, and of my husband's antecedents he could say nothing with certainty. He himself believed him to have been the son of a small farmer in the south of England, and that his money had come to him from a rich uncle. Further than that he professed to know nothing, and with this scanty information I was obliged to rest satisfied. Captain Lant and I parted at the diligence office. He was going forward to Rome, while all my desire was to get back to England.

"On feeling for my notes a few minutes after

landing from the steamer, I found that they had been stolen. I had omitted to take the numbers of them, and the police could do nothing to assist me. Four sovereigns and some loose silver was all the money I had in the world. After a couple of days spent at a quiet boarding-house in London, I set out for Dupley Walls. It was late in autumn, and the weather was excessively cold. There was no railway in those days, and the coach by which I had to travel was full inside. I travelled outside, and had to be lifted down at Tydsbury, so benumbed was I with the intense cold. No news from home had reached me during the time of my sojourn on the continent, and now, at the Tydsbury hotel, I heard for the first time that my father was dead. I heard it to all outward seeming as a stranger might have heard it; none there knew who I was.

"I parted with my last half-crown at the hotel, and then I set out to walk the three miles to Dupley Walls. You must bear in mind that I had not been at the hall since I was four years old, and that, consequently, the way was entirely

strange to me. I did not leave the little town till dusk, and the snow was falling fast by the time I got fairly out into the country lanes. I inquired at one or two cottages by the way, but I must have wandered far out of the direct road, for when I at length reached Dupley Walls, wet through and half dead with cold and fatigue, the turret clock was just striking twelve. The house loomed vast and dark before me, with nowhere a single ray of light to bid me welcome. My heart grew faint within me. I lay down under the portico and prayed that I might die. How long I had lain thus I cannot tell, when I was roused to partial consciousness by hearing a sound as if some metallic substance had fallen on to the flagged floor of the hall inside. Then I heard faint sounds as if some one were moving about in the darkness, and presently a dim thread of light shone from under the door. As I afterwards learned, my mother had been to pay her customary visit to the Black Room upstairs, and in returning across the hall had dropped her lamp to the ground. On seeing the thread of light I staggered to my feet, and beat with both

my hands against the door. Then a voice cried out, 'Who are you? and what do you want?'

"'My name is Helen Fairfax,' I replied, 'and I want to see Lady Pollexfen.'

"There was a dead silence for full two minutes, then I heard the rustle of a silk dress, and presently the great bolts were drawn one by one, and then the door of my lost home was flung wide open, but not for me to enter. On the threshold stood a tall figure, dark and threatening, dark except for the white hands, gemmed with rings, one of which held on high a small antique lamp, and the white face full of wrath and menace.

"'I am Lady Pollexfen,' said this phantom, in a cold, passionless voice. 'Once more I ask, Who are you?'

"'Your daughter, madam. Helena, your unhappy child.'

"'My daughter Helena died and was buried long ago. You may be her ghost for aught I know or care. In any case, this is no place for you: within this door you can never enter: under this roof you can never come. Go! I

have no daughter. I am childless and a widow.'

"'But, madam—mother, hear me! I am your daughter—I——'

"'I tell you that I have no daughter,' she interrupted, in her cold, imperative way. 'My daughter fell into shame, and then to me she became as utterly dead as if the ocean were rolling over her bones: dead in heart and dead in memory. You are an impostor. Go!'

"'Oh! mother, listen to me. I am not an impostor. I am your own daughter Helena. No shame clings to my name. My husband is dead, and this is the only place in the wide world where I can ask for shelter or a crust of bread.'

"'Not so much as a crust of bread shall you ever have from me. You know my will. Go at once and never darken this door again. When you die, may you die uncared for and unknown! May your eyes be closed by the hands of strangers, and may the hands of strangers lay you in your grave! Go!'

"Speaking thus, Lady Pollexfen faded back into the darkness. Slowly and resistlessly the door was closed: slowly and deliberately the great bolts were pushed into their sockets: the silk dress rustled; the ribbon of light shone for a moment under the door; then all was darkness and silence, and I was alone.

"I crept away from the cruel door into the less cruel night. The night and the snow seemed like friends that would wrap me round, and tend me, and hush me into a sleep that should know no waking in this bitter world. I was like one on whose soul sits some awful nightmare which makes him seem, even in his own eyes, something other than himself. knew that the woman who had smitten me with those cruel words was my mother, but I was past wondering at that, or at anything else. All that had befallen me was only in the common course of events, and it was quite right and proper that I should be walking there alone at that hour, with my back turned to the roof that should have sheltered me, and with no spot in all the wide world on which I could claim to lay

my head. In my heart there was no bitterness; only a dull, vague longing for peace and rest and a deep winding-sheet of snow. There was something within me that would allow me neither pause nor rest till I had left the park of Dupley Walls behind. I had shunned the ordinary lodge-entrance, and had gained access to the grounds through a stile in a bye-lane, connected with which is a right of footpath across one corner of the estate. I went back by the same road, and at length recognised in a bewildered sort of way that I was out of the park and had all the world before me where to choose. A light snow was still falling, but the wind had died down, and with it had gone that intensity of cold from which I had suffered before. I dragged myself slowly onward, but more by a sort of instinct than by any exertion of will. But beyond this point I have no clear recollection of anything. I only know that when I woke up I found myself in the Home of the Sisterhood of Good Works, to which place I had been conveyed by a charitable carrier who had found me lying insensible in the snow.

"There I lay very ill for a long time. During one part of my illness my mind wandered, and from certain words I let drop at that time, the Sisterhood were induced to write to Lady Pollexfen. She—my mother—came. She saw me when I was unconscious of her presence, and she saw me afterwards when I was slowly coming back to life and health. Then was the unwritten compact entered into by which it was agreed that when sufficiently recovered I should go and live at Dupley Walls, not as the daughter of its mistress, but, under the assumed name of Sister Agnes, as Lady Pollexfen's paid companion and very humble friend.

"In the meantime you, my darling Janet, had been born. I nursed you myself till you were six months old. Then Lady Pollexfen insisted on your being put out, and on my going to live at Dupley Walls. But previously to doing this her ladyship extorted from me a double promise. First, never by word, look, or deed to reveal to any one the fact of the relationship between herself and me. Secondly, never till my dying day to reveal either to you or to any one else the fact

that you and I were mother and daughter. This double promise was not made by me without first consulting those whose opinions I was bound to revere. At that time I looked upon the promise as a penalty in part for the errors of my life. Since that time I have often felt inclined to doubt the wisdom of having made it. The penalty has been a far heavier one than I thought it would be. To see you, my daughter, the one sweet flower that has blossomed out of my withered life, to see you and know you as my own, and yet not to dare to claim you as such, surely that was too great a penance for one weak mortal to bear!

"My narrative is nearly at a close. By the time you have read thus far you will understand why you were brought up at Miss Chinfeather's academy, and why you were sent from that place to Dupley Walls. Lady Pollexfen's strange treatment will also in part be understood by you. You were a disturbing element in that fossilized life to which she had become accustomed. Still, if I have read her character aright, you, her granddaughter, are far more precious in her sight

than I, her daughter, ever was. I am very very happy to think that such is the case; and I have sometimes ventured to hope that after I shall be gone, you and she may be drawn still more closely together. That the withered ashes of her affections may yet derive some vital heat from the generous impulses of your heart. That her pride may give way sufficiently to induce her to place you in your proper position in the world, and to allow your hands, as being those of the one nearest and dearest to her, to tend her lovingly on that downward path which she and I are alike treading; and of which the end can be no great distance away.

"I have necessarily left one of the most important points of my narrative till the last.

"When Captain Lant told me that he knew nothing positive as to the antecedents of your father, but that he believed him to have been the son of a small farmer in the south of England, and that his money had been left him by a rich uncle, I believed him implicitly. But during the long solitary years by which my life has been marked since that time I have gone back in thought a

thousand times to those few brief wedded months, and have brooded over all the circumstances by which they were surrounded. One result of this perpetual brooding has been that I have learned in my own mind to distrust the statement made by Captain Lant. I cannot believe that Mr. Fairfax was the son of a small farmer. He was a gentleman, and had about him all the signs of one who had been brought up among gentlefolks. From hints and odd words dropped by him at different times and afterwards recalled by me in memory, I gathered that he had travelled extensively, that he had been at college, that he was a member of one or two West-end clubs, that he had at one time kept his own hunters, and that he was personally known to several people of rank. In all this there was nothing that betrayed the farmer's son.

"From this conviction—not arrived at in a day or a month—of Captain Lant's untruthfulness, a suspicion has gradually forced itself upon me—and at the present moment it is nothing more than a suspicion—that the entire story of Mr. Fairfax's sudden death was neither more nor

less than a clever fabrication to get rid of a woman for whom he no longer cared. It may seem cruel to you, my dear Janet, even to hint at such a thing in connexion with a man whose memory you ought to revere, especially as I have not the slightest atom of positive proof on which to base such a suspicion. But now, if ever, the whole truth must be told you. About all Captain Lant's statements there was an air of unreality which did not strike me so forcibly at the time as it did afterwards, when I went back in recollection over the events of that terrible time. Sometimes the suspicion that I was nothing more than the victim of a clever lie would deepen in my mind till it almost assumed the proportions of a certainty. At other times it would wither and lose all its vivid colouring, and seem nothing more than the dream of a distempered brain. It might have been nothing more than such a dream for any action I have taken in it to prove either its truth or its falsity. My love for Mr. Fairfax died out long ago, and nothing could revivify the cold ashes. If he were not really dead, but merely wished to cast me off, he had attained

his end, and so enough. Had it been possible to lure him back to my side, the wish to do so had long passed away. I coveted neither riches nor position: my life had aims that were directed otherwhere.

"But with you, my daughter, the case is entirely different. You hold your position at Dupley Walls by a precarious tenure. Lady Pollexfen is a woman of capricious temper and inflexible will. She might choose to turn you adrift to-morrow: to cast you on the world, helpless and alone. On the other hand, she may have made adequate provision for you in the case of anything happening to herself. But this is a matter respecting which I am entirely ignorant, and were I to speak to her ladyship respecting it I should only be scouted for my pains. It is true that you are nearer to her in blood than any one now living (I am writing of myself as though I were already dead), but a woman of Lady Pollexfen's peculiar disposition is just as likely as not to repudiate any claim which might have its origin in that fact; and it must be borne in mind that the absolute disposal of Dupley

Walls, and any other property she may be possessed of, is vested entirely in her own hands.

"Under these perplexing circumstances, and with a future on which your foothold is so insecure, it has sometimes seemed to me that the wisest plan with regard to your interests would be to endeavour to unravel the mystery by which the antecedents and social position of your father are surrounded. Behind the cloud with which Mr. Fairfax chose to enshroud his life previously to our marriage, friends, relatives, fortune, happiness, may all await you, his child. So at least my dreams have run at times; and dreams at times come true.

"The terms of my oath to Lady Pollexfen forbade me from making any such inquiry on my own account, but in this matter you are entirely unfettered. If, therefore, your friends and counsellors, Major Strickland and Father Spiridion, think it desirable that such an investigation should be made in your interests, place the matter unreservedly into their hands, and leave them to deal with it in whatever way they

may think best. That its issue may prove to be for your welfare and happiness is your dying mother's fervent prayer.

"Further, should my vague suspicion that Mr. Fairfax did not meet his death at the time and under the circumstances as told me by Captain Lant, prove to have some foundation in fact, and should the story turn out to have been merely an invention to get rid of a wife who had become burdensome to him, in such a case your father is probably still among the living. Should such prove to be the fact it is by no means unlikely that the daughter of his discarded wife might be cherished and welcomed by him as even the child of a happier marriage might not be. Should the future give you a father—one who will welcome you with open hand and open heart—go to him and be to him as a daughter. Forget your mother's wrongs: on this point I solemnly charge you: let the dead past bury its dead. Be dutiful and loving as a daughter ought to be, and leave it for a Higher Power to set straight that which is crooked, and to weigh the human heart aright.

"You have been known all these years as Janet Holme, but your real name, the one by which you were baptized, is Janet Fairfax. When you were sent away to Miss Chinfeather's seminary it was necessary that your name should be enrolled in the books of that establishment. My mother would not allow you to go either by the name of Miss Fairfax or Miss Pollexfen. My own name being Helena Holme Pollexfen, my mother chose that you should be designated and known as Janet Holme, and in this, as in every other matter, her wishes were acceded to.

"I need hardly tell you that the miniature contained in the box in which I shall deposit this paper is that of your father, nor that the wedding-ring which you will find near it is the one he placed on my finger the day he took me for his wife. The relics brought me by Captain Lant as proofs of your father's death I was unfortunate enough to lose during my journey back to England.

"And now, dear Janet, my story is told."

[The few remaining pages of Sister Agnes's

confession are omitted as having no bearing on the history of the Great Mogul Diamond. They consisted of tender confidences and loving advice, and as such are sacred to the eyes of her for whom they were written.]

CHAPTER XII.

MADGIN JUNIOR'S SECOND REPORT.

"My dear Dad,—Your letter in reply to my first report reached my hands a week ago. It had been lying three days at the post-office before I had an opportunity of fetching it. I am glad to find that you approve of my proceedings, and think, all things considered, that I have not made bad use of my time. That you are sanguine as to the ultimate result of my mission here shows a buoyancy of disposition on your part that would not discredit any dashing young blade of twenty. I hope that your opinion will be still further confirmed when you shall have read that which I have now to put down.

"I may just remind you that I have now been at Bon Repos a month all but two days, and but for a fortunate accident the object for which I was sent here would still be as far

from its accomplishment as on the day of my arrival. Even now it will rest with you to decide whether what I have to communicate is of any real value, or advances even by a single step the great end we have in view. Privately, I may tell you that I think the same great end all fudge. My faith is very lukewarm indeed as to the existence of the diamond. But even granting its existence, the present possessor, whoever he may be, were he aware of our petty machinations, would laugh them utterly to scorn.

"Your reply to this would probably be that since the unknown possessor of the diamond is not cognizant of our machinations, we have an incalculable advantage on our side. To which I venture to observe that we are tilting at shadows—that both the diamond and its owner are myths, and have no foundation in fact. And now that I have made my protest, and so eased my mind, I will proceed with my narration of what has happened at Bon Repos since the date of my last report.

"The fortunate accident of which I made

mention a few lines above is neither more nor less than the serious illness of Cleon. As a consequence of this event I have been brought into closer relations with M. Platzoff. Before entering into particulars, I may just add that the stranger, Captain Ducie, is still here; but his visit, so Cleon informs me, is now drawing to a close. As I informed you before, Cleon, for some reason best known to himself, has contracted an intense dislike for the captain, and before I had been a week at Bon Repos he had set me to act as a spy on his actions. I have watched him as far as it has been possible to do so with safety. What little I have discovered is not worth setting down here; in fact, I may say that I have discovered nothing more singular in the captain's mode of life than would appear upon the surface of any ordinary life that was closely watched by some one who lacked the key to the motives with which its purposes were animated. I have, then, made no actual discovery of facts as regards Captain Ducie. But for all that, a dim suspicion has grown up in my mind, having birth I cannot tell how or when,

that the captain is not without certain private designs of his own on M. Platzoff, although of what those designs may consist I have not the remotest idea. Gentlemanly man as the captain is, there is about him a certain faint *soupçon* of the adventurer, and my first suspicion of some design on Platzoff may have had its rise in that fact. At all events, I have no better based facts to go upon,—nothing that I can set down in black and white. For my own sake more than for Cleon's, I have determined to still retain my watch on the captain. Time only can tell whether or no my doing so will in any way advance our interests.

"Cleon had been ailing for some days, but kept going about his duties as usual. One morning, however, he sent for me, and told me that he was too ill to rise, and that such portion of his duties for the day as could not be postponed must be gone through by me in his stead. Such duties would chiefly be those arising from personal attendance on M. Platzoff. I could see that he was terribly put about.

"'My master is such a particular man,' he

said. 'I have never missed waiting on him a single day these twenty years. How he will like a stranger to go through the little indispensable offices of the toilet for him is more than I dare think of. However, in the present case there is no help for it, and you may take it as a proof of the confidence I have in you that I have selected you, a comparative stranger, to act as my deputy for the time being.'

He then gave me a silver pass-key, which he told me would open the whole *suite* of private rooms occupied by M. Platzoff. He then impressed certain instructions on my mind, a minute observance of which, he said, would go some way towards reconciling M. Platzoff to the temporary loss of his, Cleon's, services. 'The private apartments,' he finished up by saying, 'consist of four rooms *en suite*. The first of them is the smoking-room; the second the dressing and bath room; the third the bedroom; lastly comes a small private library or sanctum, the walls lined with books, which there will be no need for you to enter. Take the pass-key and open the doors of the smoking and dressing-

rooms. When you reach the bedroom give three separate taps at the door with the handle of the key. M. Platzoff will then bid you enter. But before going in you must speak to him, and tell him that I am ill, and that I have deputed you, with his permission, to act in my stead. Even then do not go in till he bids you enter. Were you to enter unannounced you might come to grief. M. Platzoff always keeps a loaded revolver close by his pillow. In the sudden excitement of seeing a strange face near him, he might unfortunately make use of it. If he bid you not to enter, come back to me, and I will consider what further must be done. On second thoughts, I will write a line of explanation for you to take with you. It may serve to allay any doubts M. Platzoff might feel as to the acceptance of your services.'

"I gave him pen and ink. Not without difficulty he wrote the following words, which he read to me after they were written :—

"'I am too ill this morning to rise from my bed. Unless this were really the case, you may

be sure that my customary services would not be foregone. I am obliged to send you a stranger—that is, a person who is a stranger to you. You may place implicit confidence in him. I hope to be with you again to-morrow.

"'CLEON.'

"The style seemed to me a strangely familiar one in which to address his employer. But Cleon was not a man to do anything without a motive. In the present case he doubtless knew thoroughly what he was about.

"I took the pass-key, opened and went through the first and second rooms, and knocked at the door of the third. 'Enter,' said the voice of M. Platzoff from within. Then in the most respectful tone I could summon for the occasion I repeated the formula composed for me by Cleon. There was complete silence for full two minutes. Then M. Platzoff spoke. 'Come in,' he said, 'and let me see who you are.' I unlocked and opened the door, and then stood for a few moments on the threshold. The room was nearly in total darkness. The venetians were down

and thick curtains drawn in front of them. A faint sickly odour came through the doorway like that of some strongly aromatic drug. 'Come forward and open the blinds,' said a peremptory voice from the bed. I obeyed, and let in the cheerful daylight. 'I have a line from Mr. Cleon for you, sir,' I said, 'if you will kindly read it.' 'Give it me here,' he said. 'Cleon ill! The world must be coming to an end. I thought that fellow was made of cast-iron and could never get out of order.'

"I gave him the note. He opened it and read it with the assistance of his eyeglass. I seized the opportunity for a quiet glance round. If I were an upholsterer, my dear dad, which, thank goodness, I am not, I would draw you up a brief inventory of the contents of M. Platzoff's bedroom. As circumstances are, I can only say that it was by far the most elegantly-fitted sleeping room which it had ever been my fortune to enter. In parenthesis I may remark, that in passing through the smoke-room I had been much struck with the richness and elegance of its decorations. It is fitted up in a semi-

Oriental fashion, and except that everything in it is real and of the best quality, it looks more like a theatrical apartment fitted up for stage purposes than a real room in a country gentleman's house. Since that time I have become familiarized with the entire *suite*, and have picked up one or two ideas for interiors which may prove of service to my friend Davis of the Tabard.

"With an impatient 'Pish!' M. Platzoff tossed the note from him as soon as he had mastered its contents. He cut quite a comical figure as he lay there, his yellow skin looking yellower than ordinary in contrast with the white bed-furniture. His wizened face puckered into a scowl of perplexity. His blue-black chin-tuft rough and out of shape, and his cheeks and upper lip grimy for want of a razor. A conical nightcap like an extinguisher on his head, and his *robe-de-nuit* fal-lal'd with lace, as though he were some dainty bride of twenty. I could have laughed outright, but I took care to do nothing of the kind.

"'What is your name, sir? and how long have you been at 'Bon Repos?' he demanded,

with a sort of contemptuous anger in his voice.

"'My name is James Jasmin, sir, at your service; and I have been here just one month.'

"'One month! one month!' he shrieked. 'Then what, in the fiend's name, does Cleon mean by writing that he has implicit confidence in you? Who are you? and where do you come from? How can one have implicit confidence in a man whom one has only known for four weeks? Cleon must take me for a fool.'

"'My name I have already told you, sir. Before coming here, I was in service with Mr. Madgin, of Dupley Walls.'

"M. Platzoff's face turned from yellow to green as I uttered these words. 'From Dupley Walls, did you say?' he gasped; 'from Dupley Walls in Midlandshire?'

"'That is the place, sir.' He evidently knew something about Dupley Walls, but how much or how little, was the question. I felt myself on the brink of an abyss. Was I about to be kicked out of Bon Repos as an impostor?

"'But—but I have always understood that a certain Lady Pollexfen was the owner of Dupley Walls?'

"'Lady Pollexfen is the owner, sir, but she does not live at the hall, but at a cottage in the park; the house has been let for several years back to Mr. Madgin.'

"'And how long have you been in the employ of this Mr. Madgin?'

"'Since I was quite a boy, sir.'

"'Then why have you left him?'

"'Because he is about to reside on the Continent, and is about to break up his English establishment.'

"'Then you are acquainted with Lady Pollexfen?'

"'Only from seeing her frequently, sir. I have never spoken to her. She is very old now, and lives a very secluded life.'

"'Has she any of her children living with her?'

"'I am not aware that her ladyship has any children. I have heard speak of one son who died in India many years ago.'

"'Ah!' Then after a pause, 'Well, Mr. James Jasmin, I will accept your services for the present, but I hope to goodness that Cleon is not going to be laid up for any length of time. Ring the bell for my shaving-water, and reach me that dressing-gown.'

"Congratulate me, my dear dad, on the dexterity with which I extricated myself from a difficulty that in more awkward hands might readily have proved fatal.

"It is not requisite that I should enter into any details of the minor duties I had to perform for M. Platzoff. They were the ordinary duties of a body servant, and it is sufficient to say that I got through them without making any very egregious blunder. That I am still engaged in the same capacity is a tolerable proof that M. Platzoff is not dissatisfied with my services, for Cleon has not yet recovered, and although somewhat better, is still confined to his bed. Platzoff is not a difficult man to serve under. He does not treat his people like dogs, as I have heard of many so-called gentlemen doing. Only attend well to his minor comforts, and do

not keep him waiting for anything, and you will never hear a wrong word from him.

"Midnight is, with certain exceptions, M. Platzoff's fixed hour for going to bed. My instructions are to go every night at twelve precisely; to give a low treble knock on the door of the smoke-room, and then with the aid of the pass-key to go in. I then relieve M. Platzoff of his pipe, generally a large Turkish hookah; accompany him to his dressing-room, and take his instructions for the morning. After that I put out the lights, and then my duties for the day are over.

"But once, sometimes twice a week, M. Platzoff is in the habit of smoking opium, or some drug so much like it that I cannot tell the difference. Whatever it may be, he smokes it till he falls into a sort of trance in which he is unconscious of everything going on around him. My instructions are that when, on entering the smoke-room at midnight, I find him in such a trance, not to disturb him, but to watch by him till I see certain signs that the trance is abating. As soon as these signs show themselves, I lift

M. Platzoff bodily up and carry him to bed, and so leave him till morning. One of Cleon's most important duties was the charging of M. Platzoff's pipe when the latter was going to have one of his opium séances; but that is too nice an operation to be entrusted to my unskilled hands, and in the absence of Cleon is, I presume, gone through by the Russian himself.

"My bedroom adjoins that of Cleon, and on two or three occasions it has happened that I have been summoned by him in the middle of the night to answer M. Platzoff's private bell which rings in his room. On answering this bell as Cleon's deputy, I have found that M. Platzoff, not being able to sleep, has summoned me to read to him, or to assist him on with his dressing-gown, and to light his pipe for him.

"'But,' you will perhaps observe, 'what has all this rigmarole to do with the question of the Great Mogul Diamond?'

"I reply that, in all probability, it has nothing whatever to do with it. But I think it requisite that you should know the details of my life at Bon Repos. Secondly, you must let me say

what I have to say after my own fashion. And thirdly, the curious incident I have now to record would hardly be comprehensible to you without the preliminary details here given.

"Last night, or rather about two o'clock this morning, came one of those untimely summonses of which I have made mention above. I was aroused by Cleon's tapping on the wall that divides our bedrooms. I shuffled into a few clothes, anathematizing M. Platzoff and the whole business as I did so, and then hurried into Cleon's room. As I expected, M. Platzoff's bell had just rung, and it was requisite that I should go and ascertain what was wanted. I took my pass-key and went. I passed first through the smoking-room, next through the dressing-room, and so into the bedroom, which, to my intense astonishment, I found lighted up with a pair of wax candles, although I had left it in utter darkness barely a couple of hours before. What added to my surprise was the fact that the door between the bedroom and the library was open, and that the latter apartment was also lighted up. Having noted these things with a first in-

tuitive glance round, my second glance went to the bed in search of M. Platzoff. He was not on it. On passing round the foot of the bed, I found him lying with his face on the floor. I lifted him up and saw at once that he was in some sort of a fit. I was frightened, but did not lose my presence of mind. I had several times carried him out of the smoking-room when he was in one of his opium trances, and I had no difficulty now in lifting him up, and laying him on the bed. As I turned round with the body in my arms I saw something reflected in a large mirror opposite that nearly caused me to drop M. Platzoff to the ground. What I saw was the reflection from the lighted-up library of an oblong opening like a doorway in the book-shelves with which its walls were lined—an opening which, had it been there, I should hardly have missed noticing before, although I had not been above three or four times in the room. As soon as I had laid the unconscious Russian on his bed, I stole on tip-toe into the library. I had not been mistaken. There *was* an opening in the wall formed by the sinking into a deep

recess of a portion of the bookcase. In the recess thus formed was an iron door, now shut. As I looked, this question, without any consciousness on my own part, was put to me: *Can this be the entrance to some secret room in which the Diamond is hidden?*

"I had no time to consider the probability or otherwise of this question. Certain sounds from the other room drew me back at once to the side of M. Platzoff. Signs of returning consciousness were visible. I propped him up with the pillows, and sprinkled water on his face, and chafed his hands. Slowly he came back to life. 'Better—better—all right now,' were his first words; then turning his lack-lustre eyes on me, 'Who are you?' he said. 'Ah, I remember—Jasmin,' he continued before I could reply. Then all of a sudden a frightened look came into his face, and he began to fumble nervously in the pocket of his velvet dressing-gown. 'What have you lost, sir? Is it anything I can find for you?' I asked. 'No, no,' he replied excitedly; 'only my key—only my key. Ah! here it is,' he cried a moment later, as he

brought into view from one of his pockets a curiously-shaped key, the like of which I had never seen before. With a great sigh of relief he sank back on his pillows.

"'Go and wake up Wrigley, and tell him to give you some cognac,' he said next minute. 'A little brandy is all I need at present.'

"I left the room to carry out his request, and was not away more than five minutes. As I handed him the cognac I glanced stealthily at the mirror. The opening in the library wall was no longer visible. The mirror reflected an unbroken array of shelves closely packed with books. M. Platzoff had evidently felt himself strong enough to get out of bed and fasten the secret door during my absence.

"He drank a little of the brandy and then told me that I might go back to bed. I proffered to sit up in the next room during the remainder of the night. But he would not hear of it: only, he said, he would have the lights kept burning. I had got my hand on the door when he called me back. 'Look here, Jasmin,' he said. 'It is my particular wish that

not to any one shall you say a single word respecting what has happened to-night. Not even to Cleon must you mention it. Obey me in this, and you will find that I shall not forget you. Disobey me, and I shall be sure to hear of it. What say you?"

"Of course I promised all he asked, and he seemed tolerably easy in his mind when I left him. I satisfied Cleon's curiosity with a passable excuse, and then went back to bed.

"M. Platzoff is lying later than usual this morning. Consequently I have an hour or two to myself, which I now employ in finishing this report. Write to me as soon as possible after receipt of it, and let me have your opinion as to what my next step ought to be. Cleon will be able to resume his duties in two or three days, and when that event takes place I shall be relegated to my old position, and shall have little or no personal communication with M. Platzoff.

"Your affectionate Son,

"J. M."

CHAPTER XIII.

ROOM NUMBER FOUR IN THE CORRIDOR.

It has now become requisite to return to Captain Ducie, whose proceedings have been neglected for some time past.

When we left him last he had just found on the floor of his host's private library one of the tiny paper pellets which he had dropped purposely from his pocket when blindfolded the previous night. The finding of this pellet he looked on as proof-positive that the entrance to the hiding-place of the Diamond must be in that room. His discovery was an important one. It was his first step towards that goal whither all his hopes and wishes now tended. It placed him at once on a certain vantage ground. Still he was puzzled by the consideratiou of what his second step ought to be. For some time he could not see his way at all.

On the pretence of wanting some particular volume from its shelves he contrived once and again to visit the private library while Platzoff was engaged elsewhere. But he could not visit it without first asking permission, owing to the simple fact of its door being always kept locked. The required permission was grudgingly granted by Platzoff—he could see that, also that it would not be wise to court the privilege too often. Indeed, it was a privilege that proved of little or no service, either Cleon or Jasmin being sent with him to unlock and relock the door, and evidently having secret instructions not to leave the library so long as he was in it. While looking for the required volume he could merely take a few careless glances around, and such glances merely served to show him that the line of book-shelves was unbroken except by the two doorways and the fireplace. He had not, indeed, been sanguine enough to expect that such a casual examination would reveal to him the secret entrance that led to the cavern. But he had half hoped that by some faint sign, by some insignificant token, which to those not in the

secret would seem utterly meaningless, he might be able to seize on the first hint of the wished-for clue. But in so far he was doomed to disappointment. No sign nor token of the faintest kind was visible to his quick-searching eyes.

So day after day came and went till but two days remained before the time fixed for his departure, and it seemed to him that he might just as well have never heard of the existence of the Great Mogul Diamond, much less have been favoured with the sight of it, for any use that he could make of his knowledge. Turn the subject in his mind which way he would, in this light and in that, there seemed no egress from the difficulty in which he now found himself. But however much Captain Ducie might be inwardly chagrined he betrayed no traces of it on the surface. On the contrary, he had never striven more assiduously to make himself agreeable to his host than he did during this period of his deepest mortification. In every way that he could possibly think of he tried to make himself indispensable to Platzoff—or, if not indispensable,

such a pleasant element, such a piquant seasoning to the course of everyday life at Bon Repos, that the Russian should part from him with regret, and nothing be wanting to secure another invitation to the same roof in time to come. These exertions were not without their reward—a more immediate reward than he had ventured to hope for. On the morning of the day but one before that of his departure, as he and Platzoff were sitting together in a summer-house that overlooked the lake, said the captain, after a pause in the conversation :—"Three days hence, instead of having this pleasant scene to gaze upon at will, I shall have nothing but London's dusty streets with which to solace my eyes. But, in any case, I shall have a store of pleasant recollections to take back with me."

"Is the time of your leaving me so near?" said the Russian. "In the pleasure of your society I had almost forgotten that such a time must necessarily come. But why go, *cher ami?* Why not extend your visit till—till you are tired of us and our quiet life, if, indeed, you are not that already ?"

Captain Ducie shook his head. "My sojourn at Bon Repos has been a very pleasant one," he said, "and I am by no means tired of it. But other engagements claim my attention, and I am afraid that I dare not make any longer stay here."

"See, then. You can do this to oblige an old man," said Platzoff. "Of late I have not been well—in fact, I have never quite got over that accident on the railway. My doctor down here does not seem to understand what ails me, and I have had some thought of going up to London for the sake of better advice. I cannot, however, go for three weeks: there are certain matters that must be attended to before I can leave Bon Repos even for a few days. See, now. You shall put off your journey for three weeks, and then we will go up to town together. *Que dites vous?*"

Of course Captain Ducie could do nothing but accede as gracefully as possible to his host's request. He was, in truth, very well pleased to accede to it, even although the three weeks in question might do nothing towards the accom-

plishment of his secret hopes. Bon Repos was decidedly preferable to two stuffy rooms in a London back street, especially at a season of the year when the hegira of the fashionable world was just setting in. He would stay where he was as long as it was possible to do so.

There had been no conversation between Ducie and Platzoff respecting the Diamond since the night they two had visited the cavern together. Ducie had tried to broach the subject once or twice, but Platzoff had fought so shy of it that the captain had not ventured to proceed, but had turned the conversation into other channels. It seemed to Ducie as if Platzoff half repented having taken him so fully into his confidence. It was evidently not his intention to enlighten him any further in the matter.

The first week of the three had come to an end. According to custom, Ducie and Platzoff were sitting together on a certain evening in the smoke-room. It was one of the Russian's drashkil nights. He had been smoking hard and fast, and was already in a state of coma, lost to all outward influences. Ducie looked at

his watch, debating within himself whether it would not be wiser on his part to go off to bed than to sit there any longer with his unconscious host. And yet it was only half-past ten—rather early for bed. He sat staring at his host, and toying absently with his watch-guard, when, clear and vivid as a shaft of lightning, there flashed across his brain a thought that struck him breathless for one moment, and the next startled him into the most intense life. He rose noiselessly to his feet, and stood for a full minute with his fingers pressed to his eyes, thinking, so it seemed to him, as he had never thought before.

That one minute sufficed to elaborate the scheme that had come to him as suddenly and as startlingly as a veritable inspiration of genius. Had his thoughts clothed themselves in words, they would have expressed themselves somewhat after this fashion:—

"It is only half-past ten o'clock, and Platzoff has smoked himself into a state of unconsciousness. On no account is he ever disturbed by his valet till the clock strikes twelve: ergo, I

have an hour and a half before me safe from interruption. Platzoff always carries about with him a silver pass-key that will open every door in the house, unless it be those of the bedrooms of his guests and his servants. Suppose I possess myself of that pass-key for the time being, and penetrate by its assistance into the library. Once in the library with a clear hour and a half to call my own, it will be strange if I cannot succeed in making some discovery that will prove of service to me."

The first thing to be done was to satisfy himself that Platzoff was really and truly unconscious. Taking him by the arm, he shook him, gently at first, and then with greater violence. But the Russian only uttered a low, inarticulate moan of protest. Then Ducie ventured to lift up one of his eyelids. The glazed, fishy look of the eye below it was sufficient to convince him that from Platzoff himself he had nothing to fear. Then with a light-fingered dexterity that would not have discredited a professional pickpocket he began to search for the silver key. He was not long in finding it. There it was,

in a small inner pocket of Platzoff's vest. He drew it out with a heart that beat a little faster than common. So far all was well. He stood for a few moments with the key in his fingers, listening intently. Not a sound of any kind inside the house or out. As he stood thus, he bethought himself of a little brass bolt on the inside of the door that opened into the corridor. By means of this bolt Platzoff could at will secure himself even against the intrusion of Cleon. This bolt Ducie now shot noiselessly into its socket. If Cleon—or rather Jasmin, now that Cleon was ill—were inadvertently to come before his proper hour, he would have to wait till the door was opened for him from within. Having thus secured himself against any possible interruption, Ducie, after taking a last glance at his host, walked boldly across the room, and applying the key, opened the inner door and passed forward into the dressing-room. From the dressing-room he gained access to the bedroom, and from thence into the library. The latter room being in entire darkness, he had to go back into the bedroom for a candle, two of which were

always lighted there at dusk and kept burning till M. Platzoff went to bed.

As already stated, the library had two doors opening into it, one that gave from the bedroom, and another that faced you as you went in. A brown curtain fixed by means of rings on a brass rod hung before this second door. Ducie never remembered having seen this curtain more than three parts drawn, leaving visible a small portion of the door. In fact, it appeared to him, considering the matter, as though the curtain were never touched, its exact position seemed so unaltered from time to time. His first idea on his first visit to the library after his sight of the Diamond, had been that through this second door lay the secret entrance to the cavern. But it was an idea that found no resting place in his mind. The Russian was not the sort of man to adopt such a palpable expedient as an ordinary door to mark the entrance to the secret staircase. Ducie had felt convinced at the time that behind those ponderous bookshelves lay the hidden entrance, and he was equally convinced of it to-night. Therefore, in-

stead of taking any notice of the second door, he at once proceeded, candle in hand, to make an examination of the shelves.

They were made of mahogany, substantial and old-fashioned,with elaborate flutings between each compartment, and were crowned with carved bosses of fruit and flowers intermixed. Every shelf was completely filled with books, none of which were dummies, as Captain Ducie took care to verify. Beginning at the right-hand corner, he went completely round the room. The fire-place, too, came in for an amount of critical examination such as had probably never been bestowed on it before. The window that gave light to the library was in the outer wall of the house, and looked on to the lawn. Like all the windows in M. Platzoff's private suite it was crossed and recrossed by some half-dozen iron bars artfully let into the woodwork so as not to be visible from without. The outside walls of Bon Repos were of an antique thickness, as though they had been built to last a thousand years. They were, in fact, quite thick enough to allow of a narrow staircase being hollowed out

of their substance. It seemed, therefore, to Ducie just as necessary to examine carefully that side of the room as it did to examine the inner side.

He examined both the sides and the ends, carefully, thoroughly; but the result of his examination was that he was exactly as wise when he left off as when he began. Not a crevice, not a cranny, not a discoloration of the wood, not the faintest trace of a secret spring was anywhere to be found. He tapped each panel and compartment separately with his knuckles, but he was unable to trace any difference in the dull dead sound given out by each and all. Then he went down on his knees to examine the carpet. It was a sombre velvet pile, and was nailed down at the edges with a number of small tin-tacks driven through it into the floor. The corners of the carpet had not been carefully swept, and the tiny indentations in it where it was pressed down by the heads of the tacks were full of dust. "Now," argued Captain Ducie with himself, "if the entrance to the cavern where the Diamond is hidden is through an opening in the floor of this

room, then, in order to reach that opening this carpet or a portion of it must be taken up. Is it likely that M. Platzoff, who by his own account visits his Diamond at least once a week, would take up and nail down his carpet every time he wishes to look on his wonderful gem? Further: if the carpet had been lately taken up, the indentations caused by the heads of the nails would not be full of dust as they are now. The nails now in have not been touched for a month at the least."

Captain Ducie rose from his unwonted position, and put down his candle on the table with a muttered oath. He was baffled at every turn. He felt ready to knock his head against the wall, so eaten up was he with inward rage and mortification. But it was the cunning of the serpent and not the rage of the lion that was needed in his case. He flung himself into a chair, and in a few minutes had cooled down sufficiently to consider what his next step ought to be. Was any other step possible to him? he asked himself.

And then he answered himself with a lugubrious shake of the head. Only one thing

remained to be tried, and that was the second door. It might be just as well to ascertain, if it were possible to do so, on what part of the house it opened. He had no recollection of having seen such a door in his perambulations about the interior of Bon Repos.

The brown curtain that hung before the second door was only half drawn. Captain Ducie drew it impatiently on one side and inserted his pass-key into the lock. It turned without difficulty, but on trying to push open the door, he found that it stuck and did not readily give way. This fact, slight as it seemed, proved to the captain that the road to the hiding-place of the Diamond did not lie through that door. The door when opened revealed a narrow and gloomy corridor thickly carpeted with dust. One side of this corridor was formed by a bare unbroken wall. On the opposite side, at intervals of a few feet, were four doors, all now locked. There was yet another door at the end of the corridor opposite to that by which Ducie had entered. This last door was not merely locked but was further secured by some half-dozen large screws drawn

through the inner side and wormed deep into the massive posts.

When he had so far completed his examination, Captain Ducie turned to the four side doors. In the case of these also he found his pass-key available. Still carrying the light in his hand, he opened the first door and found himself in a gloomy and shuttered bedroom which had evidently not been occupied for a very long time. From this an inside door opened into a dressing-room, also shuttered and thick with dust. The second door in the corridor led also into this dressing-room. The third door in the corridor opened into another bedroom, and the fourth into its adjoining dressing-room. These two latter rooms, like the first two, had apparently not been entered for years.

To Captain Ducie it seemed plain enough why these rooms were kept untenanted, and the door at the extreme end of the corridor nailed up. M. Platzoff evidently did not choose that any one should come into too close proximity to the room within which lay the secret of the hidden door. For that the hidden door was in the

library everything he had discovered that night went indisputably to prove. He relocked the four rooms, and went back to the library musing upon all he had seen. He was just about to shut and fasten the curtained door when a sudden thought struck him and caused him to pause. He stood musing for a few moments, his face gradually brightening the while, and then taking up his candle, he retraced his way to the fourth room in the corridor. He went in, put down his light, and succeeded after some difficulty in unfastening the shutters, which were strongly barred with iron. This done, he shut up his candle for a while in an empty wardrobe, and then proceeded to fold back the shutters. The night was a fine one, and the stars afforded him sufficient light for what he wanted to do next. Between the shutters and the window was a faded green blind, at present drawn up about three parts of the way to the top. From this blind depended a green cord that ended in a tassel. In this cord Captain Ducie tied a simple slip knot. When this was done, he unhasped the window, and tried whether the lower sash would work up

and down readily and without too much noise. Finding that the window worked satisfactorily, he left it unfastened, and then proceeded to put back the shutters, which also he left unbolted. Then he took his candle out of its hiding-place and went back to the library, closing behind him both the door that led into the corridor and the curtained door, but leaving them both unlocked.

Midnight was now close at hand, and it was necessary that he should get back to the smoke-room. But even with more time at his command, he could have done nothing more to-night. When he got back to the smoke-room, he found Platzoff to all appearance precisely as he had left him. He put back the pass-key into the pocket from which he had taken it, and unbolted the outer door. Ten minutes later Jasmin, the new valet, acting temporarily in place of Cleon, coming into the room, found Captain Ducie quietly smoking beside the comatose body of his master.

CHAPTER XIV.

AT THE CURTAINED DOOR.

At an early hour next morning, in fact long before M. Platzoff was out of bed, Captain Ducie, cigar in hand, took a ramble round the exterior of Bon Repos. While exploring the four rooms on the preceding evening he was struck with the recollection of having on one occasion seen their shuttered windows from the outside. A day or two after his arrival at Bon Repos he had gone on an exploring expedition about the grounds, and it was on that occasion that he had seen them. He had taken them as ordinary unused chambers, and had had no further curiosity respecting them. He remembered now that they looked—or would have looked if their shutters had been open—into a very thick bit of shrubbery, so dense, in fact, as

to be all but impenetrable, and looking as if it had not been pruned for years. And yet this very bit of shrubbery was within a few feet of the delicious little flower-studded lawn on to which the windows of Platzoff's private rooms opened; indeed, the four shut-up rooms were merely a continuation of the same wing in which the private rooms were situate. It was evident that since the four rooms had been disused the shrubbery outside them had been allowed to grow as thick and wild as it chose, as though it were Platzoff's wish to screen them as much as possible from observation.

Captain Ducie having pierced this shrubbery, found himself within sight of the four windows, and saw that he had not been mistaken as to their position. Through the dusty panes of the last window of the four he could just make out the knotted cord as he had left it over night. He took a few quiet observations, unseen by any one, and then went back indoors.

That night, as usual, Captain Ducie accompanied his host to the smoke-room. Drashkil was not introduced, and the two friends passed

a pleasant evening, smoking and conversing. As midnight struck, Jasmin entered. Ducie rose, shook hands with Platzoff, bade him good night, and retired. Having reached his own room, he locked the door. Then he proceeded to dress himself in a suit of dark gray tweed. On his feet he put a pair of Indian mocassins. His next proceeding was to produce a coil of strong rope from one of his trunks, one end of which he tied firmly to the top bar of the firegrate. This done, he blew out the candle, drew up the blind, and opened the window. The night was fine, but overcast, and rather cold for the time of year. Having waited till he heard the clock strike one, he lowered the other end of the rope out of the open window. After listening intently for full two minutes he let himself quietly down, sailor fashion, and landed safely on the turf below. Then he paused again to listen. That part of the grounds in which he now found himself was very quiet and secluded even by day, but neither there nor in any other part of the little demesne was there any likelihood that his proceedings would be observed at that uncanny

hour. The rule at Bon Repos was that all the servants, except Cleon, should go to bed, and the house be finally closed, at half-past eleven, and the time was now ten minutes past one. Still, Captain Ducie was not a man to neglect any precaution that presented itself to his mind. Keeping well under the deeper shadow of the trees, and walking lightly on the soft turf, he was not long before he found himself close under the window with the knotted cord. He had scanned Platzoff's windows anxiously in passing, but they were so closely shuttered and curtained that it was impossible to tell whether or no the Russian had yet retired to rest.

As previously stated, the whole of Platzoff's private rooms were on the ground floor: equally as a matter of course, the four rooms that opened out of the corridor were on the same level. A slight spring sufficed to place Captain Ducie on the window-sill of the room he wished to enter. Despite all his care, he could not prevent the creaking of the window as he pushed up the sash; but he trusted to the remoteness of Platzoff's bedroom not to be overheard. Then he pushed

open the shutters and stepped lightly down into the dark room. He had noted the position of the furniture when there the previous night, and he knew that there was a clear course to the door. Another pause, to listen; then noiselessly across the floor; out by way of the door left unlocked last night, and so into the corridor; then forward, silent as a shadow, to the curtained door that opened into Platzoff's room.

Captain Ducie was far from being a nervous man, yet it is quite certain that his pulses beat by no means so equably as on ordinary occasions as he stood in the dark corridor, all his senses on the alert, his fingers on the handle of the door; dreading to take the next step, which must yet be taken or all that he had hitherto done be rendered nugatory; and stubbornly determined in his inmost heart that it should be taken, happen what might. An indrawing of the breath, a moment's pause, a turn of the handle, and almost before he knew that he was there he found himself standing behind the curtain and on the threshold of M. Platzoff's private rooms.

Not the faintest sound of any kind. Ducie

stretched forth a hand, and little by little drew back the curtain sufficiently to enable him to peer into the room. It was dark and empty; but he could see that a faint light was burning in the bedroom beyond. Now that the curtain was partly drawn aside he could hear the low, regular breathing of M. Platzoff as that gentleman lay asleep in bed. Ducie knew what a light sleeper Platzoff was when not under the influence of his favourite drug, and he durst not venture a step beyond the spot where he was now standing. Indeed, there was no reason why he should so venture. There was nothing whatever to be gained by such a rash proceeding. It was Platzoff's habit (so the Russian himself had given Ducie to understand) to visit the Diamond once, sometimes twice a week. These visits generally took place during the small hours of the morning when Platzoff awoke, restless and uneasy, from his first sleep. All, therefore, that Ducie had now to do was to wait quietly for one of these occasions, and take advantage of it when it should come, in such a way as might seem advisable to him at the time.

This was the reason why Captain Ducie did not stir from his hiding-place behind the curtain. This was the reason why he stood there for two full hours to-night as patiently as if he had been cast in bronze. But on this occasion his waiting was in vain. When he had been there about an hour and a half, M. Platzoff woke up, took a pinch of snuff, sneezed, spoke a few words aloud in some language which Ducie did not understand, and then addressed himself to sleep again. Ducie waited a full half-hour longer without stirring. Then he went quietly back by the way he had come, shutting behind him the two doors, the shutters, and the window, but leaving them all unfastened—indeed, he had no means of fastening them, even had he been so minded. He got back unseen to his own room.

The same hour next night saw Captain Ducie behind the curtained door. He knew that several nights might elapse before Platzoff should visit the Diamond, and he was quite prepared to wait there night after night till his perseverance should be crowned with success. It was just as well, perhaps, that he had made up his mind to play a

waiting game, seeing that five nights passed one after another, on no one of which did he fail in his watch at the curtained door, before Platzoff, taking counsel with himself, made up his mind to again visit the cavern.

It was on a certain night—or rather morning, being about three a.m.—after one of his drashkil debauches, that the Russian so made up his mind. Ducie was in patient waiting. From his hiding-place behind the curtain he heard Platzoff get out of bed. When he saw him put on his dressing-gown and light a small lamp — the same that the Russian had made use of on the night that Ducie accompanied him—then the latter knew that his patience was about to be rewarded.

As Platzoff advanced into the library, Ducie shrank back, and noiselessly closed the door that led into the corridor. He thought it just possible that Platzoff might lift the curtain to make sure that there was no one in hiding. Standing with his hand on the door, and listening intently, Ducie could hear Platzoff moving about the library. Then he heard the click of a spring or bolt, and

a sound like the rolling back of a door or panel. Then all was still.

After waiting for a couple of minutes, during which the silence remained unbroken, Ducie slowly opened the door, and moved forward till his face nearly touched the curtain. He could hear nothing save the beating of his own heart. Drawing the curtain an inch or two on one side, he peeped. The library was empty, and the secret door was open.

For a few seconds he felt like a man in a dream; he could hardly believe in the reality of what he saw before him. But the thought that in ten or twelve minutes at the farthest M. Platzoff would be back again, and that now or never was his opportunity, quickened him into action. His object to-night was to take such accurate note of the position of the secret door, and the means by which it was opened and shut, as would enable him in time to come to find it again without much difficulty. Platzoff was in the cavern below, and till the sound of his returning footsteps could be heard Ducie knew that he was safe.

Moving noiselessly forward into the room, he went down on one knee, and proceeded to make a careful examination of the secret door. Then he took a measuring-tape out of his pocket, and proceeded to measure the exact distance of the opening from the upper end of the room. Then he took his penknife and cut away a couple of threads out of the carpet close to the book-case, at those points precisely where the secret door fitted into it when shut. Not less carefully did he examine the spring, and the mode by which it was acted on when the door was closed. There was nothing very complicated about it now that its mechanism was laid bare. A very slight examination sufficed to show Ducie its method of working, and where and how it was opened from without.

A faint noise from below warned him that his time was up. He glided back as noiselessly as he had come, and disappeared behind the curtain just as M. Platzoff began to ascend the steps that led from the cavern.

Captain Ducie stood with his hand on the door of the corridor for a full hour before he ventured

to take another step in retreat. Then judging that Platzoff, who had gone to bed again, could not fail to be asleep, he went quietly back by the way he had come.

CHAPTER XV.

THE LITTLE PACKET FROM LONDON.

Next morning, immediately after breakfast, Captain Ducie shut himself up in his own room on the plea of having several important letters to write. The letters resolved themselves into one note, of no great length, addressed to a friend in London—to the same friend, in fact, to whom he had applied for a translation of the stolen cryptogram. Although the note did not contain more than a dozen lines, Captain Ducie was unusually particular as to its composition. He corrected and re-wrote it several times before he was satisfied. Then he sealed and directed it, and went down into the village and posted it himself. Then he set himself to wait patiently for a reply.

A reply came on the fifth day by post, in the

shape of a tiny square packet. Captain Ducie received the packet from Jasmin with apparent indifference, but he did not open it till he was alone. The contents consisted of a brief note from his friend, inside which was a small square box made of very thin wood, which proved to be filled with some dark, fatty-looking substance, from which exhaled a faint, sickly odour that was far from pleasant. The following is a copy of the note:—

"My dear Ducie,—I send you a small quantity of the drug you ask for. I daresay there will be enough to serve your purpose. It is an exceedingly powerful narcotic, and very little of it must be used at one time. I greatly question the advisability of using it at all in the case of neuralgic pains such as you describe, but I presume you are acting under advice.

"Glad to hear that you are enjoying yourself so thoroughly. Town is anything but pleasant at this time of the year, and to be strolling on the banks of Windermere would suit much better the idiosyncrasy of

"Your perspiring but devoted friend,

"Geo. Bexell."

Captain Ducie, after taking one whiff at the contents of the box, put it carefully away under lock and key. Nothing further could be done till the next evening that his host might devote to drashkil-smoking. For that occasion he had not long to wait.

Ducie was now so far familiar with the process of drashkil-smoking and its results, that from the first evening of Cleon's absence he had taken upon himself the office of preparing M. Platzoff's pipe. This he did in that easy good-natured way which sat so gracefully on him, and made his simplest acts seem better than greater things done by another. On the first "big smoke night" after his receipt of the tiny packet from London, Ducie did not fail to proffer his services as usual, and Platzoff was glad to accept them. This evening as he charged the pipe out of the little silver box in which the preparation was always kept, he turned his back on the Russian, who was lazily reclining on the low cushioned seat that ran round the room, and seemed longer than usual in filling it to his mind. Platzoff was not heeding him at all, but was gazing with half-shut

eyes on the lamp, of Oriental workmanship, by which the room was lighted.

"What strange patterns or weavings of life we often get," he said, speaking more to himself than to Ducie, "when we are asleep, or in a fever, or in any other state in which the vagaries of the brain are no longer controlled by the force of reason, or no longer restrained by what you would call the trammels of common sense. It is like looking at life through a kaleidoscope—a strange jumble of many-coloured differently shaped fragments, which yet shake themselves into curious and unlooked for patterns that have oftentimes a beauty and coherence of their own such as we seldom see in real life. Singular, too, that behind many of these brain-weavings which at first sight seem so purposeless and absurd there lurks an idea, sometimes a very subtle one, and wholly dissociated from any waking thought that we can remember. It is as if such an idea had found its way by chance into one's brain, and was determined to make its presence known by scratching a few quaint characters on the walls of its new domicile."

"You fly too high for me to follow you," said Ducie, with a laugh. "It is time you were ballasted with a pipe of your favourite drug. You have a lot of cobweb fancies in your brain that want clearing away. To-morrow you will be as practical and business-like as any Englishman of us all."

"I hope not. That is a level to which I do not aspire," answered Platzoff. "There is not sufficient *far niente* in the character of you English. You lack repose, and the grace of inaction. You are the world's ploughhorses. It is your place to do the hard work of the universe. Beyond that you are good for little. *Mais donnez-moi ma pipe, monsieur, s'il vous plait. Voilà ma consolation pour tous les defauts du monde.*"

He took the amber mouthpiece between his lips, and Ducie applied an allumette to the bowl. Spirals of thick white smoke, emitted from the Russian's mouth, began to ascend slowly in languid viperous wreaths towards the roof. Soon a dull drowsy film began to thicken in his eyes and to quench their light. Soon the muscles of his

face began to relax, and all expression save one of vacuous self-enjoyment, to fade out of his features as daylight dies slowly out of a landscape at set of sun. Ducie had filled for himself a pipe of cavendish, and now sat down a yard or two removed from his host.

"Ducie, *mon petit,*" said Platzoff, speaking already in tones that were strangely unlike his own, "there is a peculiar flavour about my pipe to-night, such as I never remember to have experienced before. I cannot understand it."

"Is it a flavour that you like, or one that you dislike?"

"I don't altogether dislike it," answered Platzoff. "But why is it there at all?"

"Can't say, I am sure," replied Ducie in his quiet way. "I filled your pipe this evening out of a fresh lot of drashkil that Cleon mixed for you this morning. Perhaps your taste is out of order."

"Perhaps so. Anyway, the pipe is delicious, but terribly strong. I can talk no more. *Bon soir, ami,* and pleasant dreams."

"In another ten minutes he will be as firm as a rock," murmured Ducie to himself. He looked at his watch. It was just eleven o'clock.

Ducie sat smoking his cavendish and watching his host stealthily from under his thick eyebrows. He had put a very small portion of the contents of the little packet from London into Platzoff's pipe, and he was curious to see how it would act. His intention was simply to send Platzoff into a sounder sleep than usual, and so make sure that he would not be disturbed by the unexpected waking of the Russian later in the night. For he had made up his mind that this night of all others he would steal the Great Mogul Diamond. In his own thoughts he did not use such an ugly word as *steal* in connexion with the affair. He merely remarked as it were casually to himself, that to-night he must appropriate the Diamond. He would retire at twelve o'clock as usual. Later on, when the last sitter-up could hardly fail to be asleep, he would come back as he had come so many times of late, letting himself down by means of the rope from his own window; and so, by way of No. 4 room and the corridor, reach

M. Platzoff's private rooms. Once there, he could easily deprive the unconscious Russian of his pass-key, and now that he knew the secret of the hidden door, he would have no difficulty in making his way direct into the cavern; after which, to appropriate the Diamond would be the most natural thing in the world. Returning by the way he had come, he would carefully re-lock the cavern doors and shut the secret door. He would replace the pass-key in Platzoff's pocket, and retire unseen to his own room. Not improbably days would elapse before Platzoff again went to look at his Diamond, and when he should find that it was gone—what then? Why should he, Ducie, be suspected of stealing it any more than any one else who might happen to be in the house? And even granting the worst—that Platzoff suspected him of stealing the Diamond, even charged him with stealing it? For the suspicion he did not care one groat, and the charge was one that could not be proved. The only result would be a quarrel between himself and M. Platzoff, and a premature departure from Bon Repos. All this would not be difficult to bear. The fact of the

Diamond being his at last would act as a salve for all the minor ills of life.

So ran Captain Ducie's thoughts as he sat smoking and watching M. Platzoff's faculties fade gradually out, like those of a very old man who has outlived his proper age. To-night the process was swifter than usual, thanks to the narcotic which he had put unseen into the Russian's pipe. He looked on with a complacent smile, caressing his moustache now and again.

Platzoff passed quickly from stage to stage of the process, till, in no long time, complete coma supervened, and he lived no longer save in the opium-smoker's fantastic world. The light in his pipe died out, the amber mouthpiece slipped from between his lips, his fingers relaxed their hold on the stem, his head drooped, his jaw fell slightly, a thin dark line marked the space between his imperfectly closed eyelids. He sighed gently twice, and was gone.

To all these signs Captain Ducie was now well accustomed, and he regarded them entirely as a matter of course. He refilled his pipe, and lay back, with his hands clasped under his head,

gazing up at the gaudy ceiling, and building pleasant castles in the air. As the clock struck twelve, Cleon or Jasmin would enter, and he himself would go to roost for a couple of hours. Then would come the time for his great enterprise.

He had been thus quietly engaged with his second pipe, for a space of five or six minutes, when, finding that it did not draw to his mind, he sat up with the view of ascertaining what was the matter with it. In the act of opening his knife, he turned his eyes unthinkingly on M. Platzoff. In the face of the silent man sitting opposite to him there was something that caused his own face to blanch in a moment, as though he had seen some unmentionable horror. He rose to his feet as though moved by some invisible agency. Great beads of sweat burst out on his brow; his lips turned blue; in his eyes was a terror unspeakable. He staggered forward with a groan, and lifted the cold hand that would never grasp his again.

"My God! I have killed him!"

He sank on his knees, and buried his face in

his hands. He knew as well as if twenty doctors had told him so, that M. Paul Platzoff, of Bon Repos, was dead. On his forehead was stamped the Great Angel's ineffaceable seal. Death had whispered in his ears, and he was deaf for ever.

That one minute which Ducie spent on his knees was, perhaps, the bitterest of his life. What his feelings were he himself could not have told. "As heaven is my witness, I did not intend to do this thing!" he exclaimed aloud, as he rose to his feet.

Then, in spite of the certainty which possessed him that Platzoff was beyond all earthly aid, he bared one of the Russian's arms, and pricked a vein with his penknife. But no blood followed, and with another groan Ducie let go the fingers that were already growing cold and stiff.

His next impulse was to ring for assistance. But in the very act of pulling the bellrope he paused. For a minute or two the very existence of such a bauble as the Great Mogul Diamond had passed entirely out of his thoughts. But as his fingers touched the rope, there came a whisper

in his ear, "Now or never the Diamond must become yours!" He paused, and sat down for a moment to think.

Platzoff was gone past recovery. Of all men living he, Ducie, was probably the only one to whom the existence of the Diamond was known; or, at least, the place where it was hidden. Dead men tell no tales. If he were to make the Diamond his,—and had he not a right to do so, having paid such a tremendous price for it—who in all the wide world would be one bit the wiser? If, on the contrary, he were to leave it untouched, it might remain undiscovered in its dark home for centuries, perhaps even till the end of time. Or if Platzoff's friend, Signor Lampini, were sufficiently instructed where to find it, of what use would it be to him except as a means for the propagation of red-hot revolutionary ideas, among which, for aught he knew to the contrary, assassination might be looked upon as a cardinal virtue? He would be worse than a fool not to seize the last chance that would ever be offered him of making the precious gem his own for ever.

Once more he looked at his watch. It wanted exactly a quarter to twelve. He had fifteen clear minutes that he could call his own, and not one minute more. No suspicion would attach to him with regard to the death of Platzoff; he felt no uneasiness on that score. But after that event should be discovered, the pass-key would be claimed by Cleon, and all access to the rooms denied him. Now or never was his time.

He hesitated no longer. With a shudder he put his hand into the dead man's pocket, and drew forth the silver key. It was the work of a moment to light the little hand-lamp, and pass forward into the library. Then he went down on his knees to look for the marks he had made on the carpet which were to point out to him the exact position of the secret door. Having found them, together with an almost invisible scratch which he had made on a particular part of the polished panelling of the bookcase, he was guided at once to the spring by which the secret door was acted upon, and in another moment the narrow stone staircase opened darkly at his feet. Down the stairs he went without pause

or hesitation, carrying the lighted lamp in one hand and the pass-key in the other. The door at the bottom of the staircase opened without difficulty, and he found himself in the low vaulted chamber at the further end of which was the door that opened into the rock. The second door was passed as readily as the first, and before him appeared the narrow passage that led to the cavern. To-night the cold moist atmosphere of the place struck upon him with a chill that made him shudder. He had trodden that passage but once before, and then it was in company with the man who now lay cold and dead in the room above. He gave a backward glance over his shoulder half expecting to see the shade of Platzoff following silently in his footsteps. But there was nothing save his own distorted shadow dogging him like some monster at once ugly and grotesque. With a sneer at his own timidity he entered the passage in the rock. In three minutes more the great prize would be his.

Slowly and cautiously he threaded the tortuous pathway that led to the heart of the hill. He reached the end of it in safety, and

the cavern loomed dim and vast before him. He paused for a moment, and held the lamp high above his head. There, fixed in the middle of the sandy floor he could just make out the vague outlines of the Indian idol. The great gem that flashed in its forehead caught a ray from the feeble lamp held by Ducie, and flung it back intensified a thousandfold. Ducie saw the flash, and his breath came thick and fast.

He advanced one step—a second. Then, before he knew what had happened, he found himself stretched on the floor of the cave and in utter darkness. He had stumbled over some inequality in the floor, and had dropped his lamp in falling. Bruised and bleeding, and with a curse on his lips, he rose to his feet.

The predicament in which he now found himself was anything but a pleasant one. That he could find the idol even in the dark, and make himself master of the Diamond, he did not doubt. But the question was, whether if he wandered so far away from the narrow passage by which access was had to the cavern, he could find it again,

and so get back to the library before the clock struck twelve. If that could be done all might yet be well. If it could not be done—but he would not stop to argue the point. He would make a bold dash for the Diamond. He would risk everything in one final throw, and trust that the good fortune which had so far befriended his enterprise would not desert him in this great crisis of his fate.

A few seconds sufficed for him to weave these thoughts in his brain, and almost before he had decided on what he would do he was advancing deeper into the cavern; advancing slowly, step by step, with outstretched arms, in the direction of the idol. By the light of his lamp he had noted its position, and now that he was in the dark he went to it nearly in a straight line. Suddenly it seemed as though the idol had risen noiselessly from the ground. The palm of his left hand smote its flat cold forehead. He lost not an instant in feeling for the Diamond. The moment his fingers touched it he thrilled from head to foot.

The Diamond was held in its place in the fore-

head of the idol by a small gold clasp which worked in the hollow of the skull. It occupied Ducie some three or four minutes, first to find the clasp, and afterwards to unfasten it. At length he succeeded in opening it, and the Diamond dropped into his palm. His own at last!

With a great sigh of relief and thankfulness he drew back his arm, and having first kissed the gem, he put it carefully away into a safe pocket, and then turned to retrace his steps. Taking the nose of the idol as his starting-point, he calculated that a straight line from it to the wall of the cavern would not land him very wide of the entrance. But the difficulty was to keep a straight line in the dark, and the darkness of the cavern was something that might almost be felt. But there was no time for hesitation. If midnight had not struck already it must be close on the point of doing so. The delay of a single minute might be the cause of his discovery either by Cleon or Jasmin. What the result would be in such a case he did not pause to ask himself. Instead, he set himself with his back

to the face of the idol and stepped out slow and steady for the side of the cave.

He had got about half way across the intervening space when a sound fell on his ear that brought him on the instant to a dead stand. It was the noise made by some one descending the stone stairs that led into the vaulted room. All had been discovered, then! The death of Platzoff, the secret door standing wide open, and his, Ducie's, disappearance. The intruder must be either Cleon or Jasmin. Was either of them aware of the existence of the Diamond, and that it had been hidden in the cave? If not, then his presence there could be easily excused on the score of simple curiosity to see so strange a place. If they knew of the existence of the Diamond, they would suspect at once that he had taken it, and would doubtless try to dispossess him of it by force. Well: they should not take it from him without taking his life also: on that point he was fully determined. Presently a thin ray of light which cut the darkness like a sword, shone through the narrow entrance to the cave. It broadened and brightened quickly. As it

drew nearer, Captain Ducie advanced to meet it. His face was pale, but very set and determined. His eyes shone from under his heavy brows with a light that boded no good to the intruder whoever he might be. He was not left long in doubt. Another half-minute brought into view the gaunt figure of Cleon, newly-risen from his sick bed. With haggard face and bloodshot eyes, and with a snarl of the lips that showed his long narrow teeth, the mulatto advanced slowly and warily. In one hand he carried a lamp, held high above his head; in the other a gleaming dagger. Ducie advanced towards him haughtily, with folded arms. As Cleon emerged from the entrance into the cave his eyes fell on the captain's tall figure. He smiled a ghastly smile, and slowly nodded his head twice.

"Thief and villain! I have found you at last," he said. "Your heart's blood shall dye the floor of this cave."

He set down his lamp on a projection of the rock, and deliberately turned back the cuffs of his coat. Captain Ducie said never a word in reply, but kept his eyes fixed unswervingly on

Cleon, as he would have done on a tiger or other beast of prey. He was without a defensive weapon of any kind, and was obliged to trust to the quickness of his eye and the strength of his muscles for safety in the coming attack.

Cleon's onslaught was exactly like that of a wild beast. It was a yell and a spring, and it would in all probability have been fatal to Ducie had not the latter been fully prepared for something of the kind. But the very instant Cleon sprang at his throat, out went Ducie's right arm, straight and true, like a sledge hammer, full in the mulatto's face. Cleon dropped before it as though he had been shot through the brain. But next instant he was on his feet again, his face streaked with blood, and now looking more ghastly than before. He said something Ducie could not understand, but if murder ever lurked in a man's eyes, it peeped out of the mulatto's at that moment. He was not at all daunted by his mishap: only rendered more wary. He made several feints and false moves before he ventured on a second dash at the captain. At last he thought he saw his chance, and in the twinkling of an eye he

had struck his dagger into the captain's shoulder. He had aimed at the heart, but his enemy had proved too quick for him. His dagger pricked into Ducie's shoulder, and Ducie's arms went round him like a vice. The mulatto was active and sinewy, but in a close struggle he was no match for the great strength of his opponent. His arms were pinned to his sides, but his head was at liberty, and with his long sharp teeth he fastened on Ducie's cheek and bit it through. This roused Ducie's blood as half a dozen pricks with the dagger could not have done. Lifting Cleon bodily up, he swung him once round, and then dashed him with all his might against the side of the cave. The mulatto rebounded from the rock, and came to the floor with a dull heavy thud. He groaned twice, and then all was still except the heavy beating of Ducie's heart.

Ducie bent over the body for a moment. "His fate be on his own head!" he muttered. Then, having made sure that the Diamond was still safe in his possession, he took up the lamp and passed out of the cave. He shut and locked the

two doors behind him, and when he got back to the library he also closed the secret door through the bookcase. As he passed through the smoke-room he gave one hasty shuddering glance at the dead body of Platzoff. The half-open eyes seemed to fix him with a look of terrible reproach. He fancied that he saw the pallid lips move. "Ingrate!" they seemed to say, "was it for this I took thee to my bosom and called thee friend?"

Ducie put his hand to his eyes and strode on. He found the door that led into the corridor half open as it had probably been left by Cleon in the horror of the sudden discovery he had made on entering the smoke-room. Ducie closed it carefully behind him. That door locked up a double secret, and it behoved him to get clear away from Bon Repos before it could be brought to light. He carried his treasure with him, and that would compensate for everything.

The moment he turned into the corridor to go towards his own rooms he began to feel faint from loss of blood. The first great excitement was over, and now his wounds began to make themselves felt. Great heavens! if he were to

lose his senses at such a critical moment and be found by the servants! They would perceive that he was wounded, and would probably strip him, and then how would it fare with the Diamond? Just as this thought was in his mind Jasmin came suddenly round a corner and started back in alarm at sight of his pale face all streaked with blood.

"Sir—Captain Ducie—what is the matter? Are you wounded?" he cried.

"A slight accident—a mere scratch," gasped the captain. "Lend me your arm as far as my room, and—and don't leave me yet awhile."

The first message sent by the telegraph clerk at Oxenholme station when he went on duty next morning, was as under: "From J. M., Windermere, to Solomon Madgin, Tydsbury, Midlandshire.

"Address no more letters to B. R. till you hear from me again. A grand fracas. The Captain and I are on our way to town. Unless I am greatly mistaken, we carry the G. M. D. with us."

CHAPTER XVI.

MADGIN JUNIOR'S THIRD REPORT.

"Button's Hotel,
"St. Helier, Jersey.

"My dear Dad,—My telegram from Oxenholme, followed by my brief note from London, will have prepared you in part for the strange events that have happened since the date of my last report. I now purpose giving you, as succinctly as possible, a narrative of those events from the point where my last report broke off. You will then understand how it happens that my present communication is dated from this pleasant little isle.

"After the conclusion of Report No. 2 nothing of consequence happened for a few days—nothing that would allow me to imagine that the discovery of the secret door in the library would

further our views in any way. M. Platzoff was confined to his bed for a couple of days after the fit in which I found him. After that time he got up as usual, and everything at Bon Repos went on as before. Captain Ducie was still with us. I understood from Cleon that he had been invited by M. Platzoff to extend his visit. The health of Cleon kept improving from day to day, and about a week after M. Platzoff's sudden attack he announced to me that from that date he would resume those personal duties about his master which during his illness had been delegated to me. Then farewell to my last chance of ever seeing the Great Diamond, I said to myself when he told me.

"And truly, at that moment I despaired utterly of ever advancing one step nearer the object that had brought me to Bon Repos. I was on the point of giving notice there and then of my intention to leave, and of writing you by the next post to inform you of what I had done. Besides, I was getting tired of my occupation—tired of Bon Repos and all in it. I began to hanker after my old way of life, in which a fictitious character

is never assumed for more than four hours at a stretch. I had been acting the part of valet for more weeks than I cared to count, and I was heartily tired of the assumption. However, on second thoughts, I determined to delay giving notice for another week. I would wait seven more days, and if nothing turned up during that time to further our views, I decided that I would throw up the situation without further delay and go back to town. Never had the hunt after the Great Mogul Diamond seemed to me a more wildgoose affair than it did at that moment.

"It was in the afternoon that Cleon spoke to me. The evening was to be devoted by M. Platzoff to drashkil-smoking—Cleon had been preparing a fresh supply of the drug that very morning—and Cleon's resumption of his duties was to commence at midnight, at which hour M. Platzoff would doubtless require carrying to bed, and the mulatto decided that that duty should be performed by himself.

"Cleon had not yet felt himself well enough to resume his custom, interrupted by illness, of going out every evening to smoke a pipe with

the landlord of the village inn. (Both the house and the landlord will be well remembered by you.) This evening he had invited me into his little sitting-room to smoke a cigar and join him over a glass of grog—a most unusual condescension on his part. We were still sitting over our tumblers when the timepiece chimed twelve. Cleon rose at once. 'Had you not better let me go to-night?' I said. 'You are far from strong yet, and M. Platzoff will most probably want carrying to bed.'

"'No no,' he said, 'I will go myself. I feel quite equal to the task. Await my return here, and we will have one more weed before parting for the night.'

"He went, and I lighted a fresh cigar. I think he must have been gone about ten minutes when he came back all in a hurry. His face was livid, but whether from fear or some other emotion I could not tell. I started to my feet and was about to question him, but he motioned me back. 'Ask no questions,' he said, 'and do not stir from this place till I come back—unless,' he added as a second thought, 'unless you hear M.

Platzoff's bell. In that case come without a moment's delay.'

"I saw he was in no mood to be questioned, so I sat down quietly and resumed my cigar. From a number of weapons that hung on the wall over his mantelpiece he selected a long and ugly-looking Malay creese. He felt its point with a grim smile, whispering something to himself as he did so, and then he hurriedly left the room.

"Now, it was all very well for Master Cleon to tell me to sit still and await his return. I had no intention of doing anything of the kind. I had a deeper interest in all that happened under that roof than he suspected.

"When he had been gone about a minute and a half, I laid down my cigar and quietly followed him down the long corridor leading to M. Platzoff's rooms. I had on the thin slippers which I usually wore in the house. M. Platzoff liked all the arrangements at Bon Repos to be as noiseless as possible.

"The corridor ends in a landing: on this landing are several doors that open into different

rooms, one of them being the door that gives access to M. Platzoff's private suite. The corridor and the landing were both in darkness.

Much to my astonishment, on approaching M. Platzoff's door I saw by the stream of light that poured from it that it was only partially closed. I drew near on tiptoe and listened, ready at the slightest sound of an approaching footstep to vanish into one of the empty rooms on the opposite side of the landing. But no sound of any kind broke the death-like silence. I listened till I was tired of listening, and then I ventured to push open the door a few inches further, and look in. The room was lighted as usual, and was filled with the faint, sickly odour of drashkil, to which by this time I had become accustomed. But Cleon was not there. There, however, was M. Platzoff, not half sitting, half reclining, on the divan as was his custom when in one of his opium sleeps, but stretched out at full length on the cushions.

He lay with his eyes half open, and at the first glance it seemed to me that he was watching me in that quiet, cynical way that I knew so well, and I started like one suddenly detected

in the commission of some great offence. A second glance showed me that in those half-open eyes there was no light nor knowledge of earthly things. I thought that he had been taken with another fit, and without further hesitation I pushed open the door and went in.

I took the inanimate body up in my arms, and was about to carry it to bed, when something in the fall of the limbs and the expression of the face struck a sudden chill to my heart, and I laid it gently down again. I sought for the pulse, but could not find it; I laid my hand on the heart, but it was still.

M. Platzoff was stone-dead!

How or by what means his fate had come thus suddenly upon him I had no means of judging. Poor Platzoff! At that moment I could not help feeling sorry for him. But presently came the thought—where is Cleon? and for what purpose did he fetch that dagger from his room? There were no tokens of murder about the dead man: he seemed to have died as calmly as an infant might have done.

I pressed forward into the bedroom, which, as

usual, was lighted up by a pair of wax candles. I took one of these and went onward into the library. I could scarcely believe my eyes when I saw the secret door in the book-case standing wide open. It opened on to a steep and narrow staircase, at the bottom of which was another door, also open. Further than that the faint light of my candle would not penetrate.

"Does this staircase lead to the hiding-place of the Diamond?" was the question that flashed across my mind. Now or never was the time to answer it. But to venture down that dismal staircase into the unknown depths beyond was a task I did not care for. Suppose that, while I were down there, someone were to come and lock me up. I might scream and call for help till I died, yet never be heard by living man. Besides, after all, the Diamond might not be hidden there. The game was not worth the candle.

I turned to go back, but at that moment the silence was shivered by a yell so utterly fiendish and unlike anything I had ever heard before, that my blood chilled at the sound, and all the stories that I had ever heard or read of Indian

cunning and ferocity came rushing into my mind.

I stood motionless, with the candle still in my hand, listening for a repetition of the terrible cry. But none came. Instead, in a little while I heard the noise of approaching footsteps. Then indeed I fled. Anxious as I was to know the meaning of what I had seen and heard, I had no desire to risk my life for the sake of gratifying my curiosity.

Leaving my candle where I had found it, I passed quickly through the suite of rooms, and did not halt till I reached the dark corridor outside. Here I waited and listened till I heard the footsteps coming through the rooms. Then I turned up the corridor, waited behind the first angle, and watched to see who should come out of the smoke-room. I expected to see none other than Cleon. Instead, I saw Ducie come staggering out, carrying a small lighted lamp in his hand, and having his face all smeared with blood. Some weird tragedy had just been enacted, and I should not have been my father's son if I had not wanted to get to the bottom of it.

I retired a few paces, and then, calculating my time, I stepped briskly forward as Ducie came up the corridor. We met face to face at the corner, and we both started back in mutual surprise. There was a wildness in the captain's eyes, and he looked as if he were about to faint.

"Sir! Captain Ducie!" I exclaimed, "what is the matter? Are you wounded?"

"A slight accident, that's all: a mere scratch," he gasped out. "Lend me your arm as far as my room."

I assisted him to his dressing-room, and once there, he sank down on the sofa with a deep sigh.

"Get me some brandy," he whispered. "Before you go, let me tell you," he added, "that should I faint you must on no account summon any further assistance, neither must you remove any of my clothes. Bear those two points in mind, and also that you are not to leave me, nor let anyone else approach me till I come round. Now go, and get back as quickly as possible."

I had only to go as far as Cleon's room for what I wanted. I found the room just as I had

left it. Cleon had not yet returned. "Would he ever return?" was the question I now asked myself. Had there not been some terrible encounter between him and Ducie, and had not the mulatto had the worst of it? Yet why should there be any encounter between the two, if it were not to determine which of them should obtain possession of the Diamond?

That the death of M. Platzoff was known to both of them could not be doubted. Supposing, then, that the existence of the Diamond, and the place where it was hidden, were equally well known, what more likely than that there should be a struggle between the two, ending fatally for one of them, for possession of the Diamond? Supposing Captain Ducie to have been the victor in such an encounter, was it at all unlikely that the Diamond was now about his person? Such a supposition would account reasonably enough for the curious injunctions he laid upon me just before I quitted his room.

Full of this great thought, I hurried back with the brandy. True enough, the captain had fainted. He lay at full length on the sofa, with not an

atom of sense left in him. But the singularity of the thing lay in the fact that Captain Ducie's right hand was deeply buried inside his vest, and there grasped some small substance—I could not tell what—with a tenacity that could not have been surpassed had his hand not been opened for twenty years. So much I discovered before I proceeded to apply any of the remedies usual on such occasions. After a few minutes he came to his senses sufficiently to know where he was and what I was about. But before his mind had become quite clear on all points, he withdrew his clenched hand from his waistcoat, stared at it wonderingly for a second or two, but without opening it; then like a flash it seemed to come across his mind what was hidden there, and with a deep "Ha!" he thrust back his hand, only to withdraw it, open and empty, half a minute later. "He has hidden away the Diamond in some inner pocket," I said to myself. From that moment I never doubted that the wondrous gem was in his possession, and I could not help admiring the cool patience and the indomitable pluck he must have displayed before he could

call it his own. All the same, I determined to try all I knew to cause it to change hands once more.

The brandy revived Captain Ducie, and in a few minutes he was able to sit up and tell me what he wanted. He told me that he had been wounded accidentally in the shoulder, and bade me assist him off with his coat and vest. The coat he flung carelessly aside. The vest he doubled up, laid it on the sofa and sat down on it. Then I cut open his shirt and laid bare the wound on his shoulder. It was not very deep, but there had been a good deal of hemorrhage. With the coolness and knowledge of an old campaigner the captain instructed me how to bathe the wound and dress it with some salve which he produced from his dressing-case. Then he put on some clean linen, washed the smears from his face, hid the ugly gash in his cheek with a strip of court-plaster, and dressed. All this was done with a silence and celerity that astonished me.

"So far, so good," said Captain Ducie. "I want you next to pack my small portmanteau. Put into it my dressing-case and all my papers,

and as many of my clothes as it will hold. Then go and pack up a few things of your own. I want you to go with me, and in ten minutes I shall expect you to be ready to start."

I made some faint objections on the score of leaving M. Platzoff in such an unceremonious way.

"I will take the entire responsibility on my own shoulders," he said. "Your excuses to M. Platzoff shall be made by me. You have nothing to fear on that score. As my shoulder is now, it is quite impossible for me to go up to town alone. You need only be away forty-eight hours, and I shall not forget to remunerate you for your trouble."

In ten minutes I was ready to start. "If Captain Ducie has got the Diamond about him, as I fully believe he has," I said to myself, "then is my occupation at Bon Repos gone, and I care not if I never see the place again. My duty is evidently to accompany the gallant captain."

When I had packed my own little valise, I stole quietly into Cleon's room. It was still empty: the mulatto had not returned. Then I

went softly down the corridor, pushed open the door of the smoke-room and looked in. No hand had touched the body of M. Platzoff since I left it last. I whispered "Farewell," covered up the white face, and left the room. I had one thing more to do. Taking a lighted candle in my hand I went into the little gallery that opens out of the drawing-room. In this gallery were several cases containing old coins, old china, rare fossils, and various other curiosities natural and artificial. It was one of these curiosities that I was in quest of. I knew where the key was kept that opened the cases. I got it and opened the case in which lay the object I was in search of. This object, to all appearance, was nothing more than a bit of green glass, except that its shape was rather uncommon. There was a small label near it, and this label I had one day been at the trouble of deciphering. The writing was so minute as almost to require a magnifying glass to read it by. After much difficulty I had succeeded in making out these words:

"Model in paste of the G. M. D. by Bertolini of Paris."

M. Platzoff was dead; Cleon, for aught I knew to the contrary, was dead too. I was about to leave Bon Repos for ever—to leave it with the man who had stolen the genuine Diamond from the man who had stolen it from its rightful owner. Why should not I take possession of the paste Diamond? As a simple curiosity it might be a gratification to Lady P. to possess it. More than that: it seemed to me not impossible that certain eventualities might arise in which the possession of an exact model of the Diamond might be of service to us. Anyhow, I dropped it quietly into my pocket.

END OF VOL. II.

UNIVERSITY OF ILLINOIS-URBANA
3 0112 042052537